

A stylized illustration of a person's back, rendered in dark blue and red. The person's hair is visible at the top, and their arms are at the sides. A red padlock is positioned at the center of the back, where a strap or cord would typically be. The background is a solid red color.

# FAYE'S NEW DAUGHTER

A psychological drama  
of forced feminization

LILY  
FLORETTE

# Faye's New Daughter

*Lily Florette*

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Lily Florette

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*Dedicated to all who patiently followed  
the original serial and to those first-  
timers who get to read the entire  
novel in one, as always intended.*

## *Authors Note*

Dear Reader,

This is a tale I've been itching to write for quite some time. It's inspired by the stories of Cheryl Lynn, an author I credit for getting me into TG fiction years ago, namely forced feminization. Before you proceed, I'd like to do a bit of housekeeping to make sure we're all on the same page.

Please do not be fooled by the initial convention of this story. Sure, it's classic forced feminization, but I wished to explore the consequences of what this could do to a person over a long period of time.

Therefore, I want to warn you that this story can get rather bleak in parts. It's told from the perspective of a cis male being forced to live at odds with his gender. It contains abuse, manipulation, mental turmoil, mutilation, and one particularly detailed scene of an explicit sexual nature.

The strange thing is that I'm quite a cheerful person in real life but this is just where the story took me. I felt this great darkness was necessary to tell the lead character's story as realistically as I could. If you are okay with this, then I hope you enjoy the ride!

Kind regards,

Lily Florette

# PART I

## 1.

I've done things I'm not proud of, terrible things that ruined other people's lives while all I had to deal with was a short prison sentence of five years. What did I do exactly?

Well, after I dropped out of high school, I lived a life akin to a parasite. I selfishly took from every place that allowed me to make a quick buck without having to work for it. When the well became dry and I had nowhere else to turn to, I became a thief.

I stole drugs from a doctor's surgery to sell on the street for profit. It was an easy way to make money. Too easy. I should have quit while I was ahead. Otherwise, she wouldn't have died. Yeah, I'm a murderer. I made a quick transaction with a girl named Jess outside a nightclub one night. I sold her ketamine, unaware that the batch was badly cut by an 'expert' acquaintance of mine.

I could tell that Jess rarely interacted with street dealers because she was rather shy, but I sold them to her anyway. Why? I needed some money to go out and get twisted that very same night. Her friends found her the next morning, lying face down in a pool of her own vomit. And that was that. I was quickly identified by witnesses and was arrested shortly after her death.

I was brought to court for theft, possession of and selling non-prescribed narcotics, and manslaughter. I was expected to serve one year in a juvenile correctional facility before being moved to the state prison for a further four years when I came of age. I was only seventeen when I brought shame upon myself, and of course, my family. My life was already over before it even had a chance to begin and it was

entirely my fault.

Whenever I close my eyes at night, I can see Jess as if she was right in front of me. She was unconventionally pretty with shiny black hair and blue streaks. When I spoke with her I felt like I had known her my whole life. I remember how her lip piercing glistened against the street lights or how her skirt bounced when she walked away, certain that she was going to have one of the best nights of her life. She plagued my mind every moment of my prison sentence but no measure of thought could account for the life I took and the pain I caused her friends and family. I knew I would have to live with the guilt for the rest of my life.

I'm not sure what it was that set me on such a rough path. Perhaps it was my Dad passing away when I was only twelve. I never knew my real mother either. Tragic, I know, but she died giving birth to me so I never had a chance to form a connection with her. I don't know. It feels wrong to put the blame on my parents' deaths. It's a bullshit excuse.

My stepmother Faye, on the other hand, I certainly do remember but not in great fondness. She made no effort in hiding her disdain for me before and even after Dad died. I'm not sure what I did to make her hate me with such passion, but I can only conclude that it was because I was wild, reckless, and undisciplined whereas she was straight-laced, mannerly, and a by-the-books career woman. I still believe the majority of her hate was unjustified, but after the gavel struck, I didn't blame her for completely cutting me off.

After all, she was the doctor I stole the drugs from in the first place. Faye was a general practitioner of medicine, a fine job for a woman of her conduct.



She was one of the three GPs in our home town Shalesburg. She was rather tall yet plump with feathery curves and a strict no-nonsense expression constantly on her face. She was pale, dark-haired, and rarely seen without her bright red lipstick. She was quite striking actually.

As a child, I used to think she was a witch, as I consistently feared her wrath, especially when I got into trouble at school. I think her rage came from the pain of having three miscarriages. She always wanted to have a daughter with Dad, someone she could raise to be a shadow of hers, someone she could call her own. Unfortunately, I provided none of these attributes for her, and I don't believe I ever could. I was a convict, a murderer, a betrayal of what my Dad stood for, and I failed him. God, I was so stupid.

I was released from prison on the 22nd of July. In my dreams, I was greeted with warmth and sunshine in a grassy meadow when I emerged through the hole in those massive iron gates as a free man.

Instead, one of the worst storms in recent memory assaulted me the moment I set foot outside. The sky cracked open in bright flashes as thunder and lightning raged over the grim, concrete landscape. I ran towards Faye's car, with the jacket I arrived with five years ago draped over my head, rain patting against the fabric. The wind was so powerful and ferocious that I was almost knocked right off my feet.

Faye did not express any sort of elation or happiness when I got into the car. I expected as much since she only visited me at Christmas during my sentence. The journey home was cold and silent, with nothing but the sound of the wipers swishing away the rain that drummed hard on the wind shield. I attempted small

talk, but it only added fuel to the awkwardness when she merely responded with the occasional grunt or murmur. All I wanted to do was to lie in my own bed thinking about what I was going to do with my life now that I was a free man.

I hoped to live with Faye until I found some work and eventually a place of my own but I was unsure of how long it would take. With a criminal record, most establishments would shred my CV even if I had glowing credentials and suitable experience. Nobody wants to hire an ex-con. I was released without parole so I would be receiving no assistance from them. I had no money or possessions to my name. I only had Faye and she made me feel as welcome as a disease.

I undressed and climbed into my old bed. It was nothing like I remembered. In fact, I was sure it was a different mattress altogether, as it felt lumpy and hard. You know those old beds that you used to stay in at your grandmother's house, the kind that you'd have the best night's sleep in, well, that's what my old cell bunk felt like and I was beginning to miss it a lot.

Even though I was free from imprisonment, I never felt more alone in all my life. At least inside things seemed simpler – three meals a day, an hour of yard time, lock down at eight. I felt lost in my own home.

## 2.

Early the next morning, I awoke to beautiful sunlight streaming through the crack of the curtains. I could hear birds chirping and tweeting in the oak branches outside the window. I knew it was early. I jumped up when the bedroom door suddenly flung open. Faye stepped through with a lofty pep in her step, clip-clopping in her heels, as she tottered to open the

curtains. The sunlight burst through and blinded me senseless. "What time is it?" I groaned, wiping the sleep from my eyes.

Faye stopped and paused for a moment before coolly saying, "It's time for a change." I had no idea what she meant by that. When I questioned her, she just ignored me and left the room with a slight smile peeking from the corner of her lips. "Get dressed," she said. "We're going into town."

After showering and dressing in a t-shirt and jeans, I found Faye down in the kitchen, humming a merry tune, chopping up some fruit for a salad. She was dressed rather well for an average day with her grey woollen pencil skirt and a starch white blouse, her black hair shining brilliantly over her shoulders and down her back.

Assuming she was going to work, I asked her what time she was leaving, but she said she took the day off. After breakfast, she told me to follow her to the car. I asked several times where we were going. She promised she would fill me in on the way. As the car pulled out of the driveway, I was starting to feel a little weary of her good mood. It didn't seem natural for her to be so content in my presence. Naturally, I felt suspicious. What was she up to?

"So, uh, are you going to tell me where we're going?"

"We're going to the dentist."

"Uh, why are we going to the dentist?"

"Well, since your time in prison is over I thought you deserved a bit of a change," said Faye. She quickly locked her gaze with mine before returning it to the road. "Dr Bisley is going to fit you for a set of braces."

I certainly did not expect this. I was worried when we

left the house but now I was just confused.

“B-Braces?” I stammered, licking my teeth out of insecurity. “Why do you suddenly feel I should get braces? I’m nearly twenty-three!”

“Exactly, which is why we cannot wait any longer for you to get them,” said Faye, as-a-matter-of-factly. She paused for a moment to compose herself. I was completely stunned when I realized she was clearly fighting an urge to cry. “Look, the five years you spent inside gave me plenty of time to think. Yesterday was a misstep on my behalf. I thought a lot about what I could have done to prevent you from going down that awful road until I realised something.”

“What was that?”

“I never made an effort to love you, Brian,” she said. Her voice started to tremble. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Utterly stunned. “I didn’t even pretend to love you. I treated you terribly from the very beginning. You were robbed of your mother at birth and I should have filled the void when I met your father. I’m not going to ask for your forgiveness because I don’t expect to receive it. I certainly do not deserve it. Just know that I’m willing to change right now and make up for all the lost support I’ve never given you.”

I felt queasy as a flurry of feelings flooded into my chest at once. I never could have imagined Faye, my evil witch stepmother, talking to me in such an affectionate manner. I was perplexed but ultimately overjoyed.

The way she looked at me, such warmth in her eyes, was all I ever wanted. I felt like I was there. I felt

like I existed. “It’s – uh – it’s alright, Faye,” I said, nervously chancing a slight touch of her arm. “You don’t have to apologize for anything. I wasn’t exactly the best stepson either. I mean, remember when I was nine, I washed your record collection in boiling water?”

“Yes, you certainly did!” Faye chortled, dabbing her tears with a tissue. She was smiling now and it was most alien to me. “You melted my copy of Saxophone Colossus, an original pressing that belonged to my father!”

“I couldn’t stand jazz when I was a kid!” I laughed, feeling more at ease. “It bored me half to death!”

Faye laughed even harder until the happy atmosphere died back down to silence. The low rumble of the car reminded me of where we were going.

“So why am I getting braces then?”

Faye paused for a moment. “When I was a teenager, my teeth were quite crooked. I hated them. I felt ugly and that no boy would ever want me. As you know, my parents ran their own corner shop, but they never really had more than enough money for rent, food, and bills. Of course, I would eventually get excellent dental care in later life but I never forgot what it felt like to be so insecure about my looks. I remember seeing the very same insecurities in you when you were a teenager. Now I wish to remedy that after ignoring it for so long. I want to make up for the lost time.”

She was right. As a teenager, I hated the way I looked, particularly my teeth. Prison did not boost my self-esteem either. I was often teased, bullied, and horribly abused in unspeakable ways that I won’t get into right

now. I stand at about 5'6, skinny but lean and strong. My vibrant green eyes were probably the standout feature on my thin, sallow face. My mousy brown hair had no particular shape to it, but it would be best described as shaggy with slightly curled ends, a far cry from the skinhead I was when entering prison.

I cannot fully admit to understanding why Faye suggested I should get braces. I thought it was random as hell and mad as a bag of spiders, but I went along with it in spite of my personal misgivings. I was just too happy to see Faye acknowledge me for once. Besides, I thought it would be great to have nice teeth when it was all said and done. When we arrived at the dentist's surgery, I had a couple of fillings, my mouth was x-rayed, and a cast of my teeth was made after I bit into a soft, play-doh-like substance.

We returned the following week to get the braces, both top and bottom teeth. I left the surgery with my jaw aching and the inside of my mouth sore and raw. The sensation of my teeth being pulled together in perfect formation was unpleasant, to say the least. I already felt regret in agreeing to the braces but I quickly got used to them as the weeks went on. And boy were those weeks something special.

I spent most of my time lounging around the house. After a month of being home, I felt very different inside. I couldn't put my finger on it but I felt quite serene, at one with my feelings, more compassionate and less aggressive. I guessed it was something to do with the newfound kinship I shared with Faye – a woman's touch if you will. We spent a lot of time together because, well, we were the only ones in the house. I helped her with some gardening, she showed me how to bake, and there were nights when we just sat up talking and drinking wine. I even showed her a

few drinking games. It was fantastic.

Then the nightmares began.

I was walking through a dark, grey forest, feeling the hairs stand up in unison on the back of my neck. Air crisp, breath icily smoked – I approached a dark pool of oily liquid that lay eerily still without reflection or ripple. I didn't feel like I was myself, I didn't feel like anyone.

A faint glimmer of light reached out to me from the stark blackness of the pool and I felt a fraction of warmth in my heart. It was elusive, almost alien to me. Then, a hand burst through the surface, grabbing my wrist and pulling me in with tremendous force. A face emerged through the inky water, the face of Jess, dead and lifeless.

I was pulled in, feeling my lungs filling with fire, my heart rotting away like a discarded apple core. I suddenly found myself back in the waking world, drenched in sweat.

The heavy blankets suffocated me so I threw them off and sat up; panting as though I had just run an entire marathon. I jumped yet again when the door swung open and Faye stepped through, garbed in her beige nightdress. It was very late into the night. She sat down at my bedside and brought her hand up to my face.

“Oh sweetheart, what's happened?” she said, lovingly stroking my cheek with her forefinger.

“I – I had a –,” I said, struggling to catch my breath. My heart was pounding against my chest. I knew this wasn't an ordinary nightmare. It was a different beast

altogether. "It was her – t-the girl –,"  
"Jess," said Faye, her concern quickly morphing into compassion. "Oh darling, everything is going to be okay, I promise you this! In time you will feel better."

Faye climbed onto the bed and brought me into her arms. As I rested my head on her bosom, I felt the guilt I carried for so many years spill from my eyes and down my cheeks. My thoughts were racing from the fact that I had not cried since I was eight to the traumatizing night terror, and finally to that very moment, which I would have deemed impossible years ago. Faye was offering me her love.

"I had my whole life ahead of me," I sobbed. "And yet so did she."

"I know, darling. I know," whispered Faye, softly stroking my hair. "But you are going to change."

We lay there for a few minutes in the dead of night until I calmed down. Faye left the room to fetch something and came back with a cup of chamomile tea and an object hidden from my view. "Here," Faye said, handing me a pill. "These always help me sleep."

"I didn't know you had trouble sleeping," I said, popping the pill back into my throat.

"A lot can change over six years," she said, bringing my head back to her chest. I was warm and comfortable when she started humming the most beautiful song. It was soothing against her heartbeat. I never wanted to leave.

She then started to brush my hair. I didn't protest because I felt some massive barriers breaking between us. It was curiously relaxing. I drifted into a deep



sleep but the strange dreams did not cease. I found myself sitting naked in an empty bathtub. Somebody was rubbing burning hot cream all over my body. The smell was sharp, aggressively stinging my senses like a knife to paper.

I could feel hands gently lavishing cream over my chest and under my arms, parts twitching and tingling with every touch. I tried to protest but I couldn't talk. The hands slid down over my stomach, kneading it ever so gently until they gradually made their way to my crotch. I let my head fall back onto the rim of the bathtub, as the fingers worked in and around my privates, stroking and smothering it in the cream.

As I stared up at the light bulb swinging back and forth, Faye's face swam into view above me. She was smiling warmly. Her lips were moving but no words were coming out. I had no idea what was going on, but I was beginning to realize that I wasn't dreaming. I had no strength for resistance.

There was only fogginess and brief hints of pure ecstasy, as she rubbed the entirety of my body from my rear down to the very ends of my toes. The massaging stopped for what felt like an eternity as the cream crackled and sunk into my skin. A burning smell filled my nose like hay fever. I sneezed, which simultaneously set off the steaming hot shower, pressing water hard down on my body, washing the cream away and reddening my skin. I was sitting upright with my head hanging between my legs, watching streams of my hair trickle down the drain. I dropped deeper into my foggy daze, feeling hot water and an assortment of pleasantly scented lotions rise up around me. After that, I could only remember vague feelings of bliss rather than fully formed memories.

I awoke in the softness of what felt like a warm cloud. The bed sheets felt unusually smoother against my skin. I licked my brace-coated teeth and exhaled deeply through my nose. After a few minutes of mustering up some much-needed energy, I lifted my head and ruffled my hair, which definitely felt silkier than the previous day. *Odd*, I thought.

I felt abnormally groggier compared to most mornings as if the inside of my head was swimming in water. Something wasn't right. When I threw the blankets off me, I snapped through the tiredness, utterly stunned to find that my whole body was bereft of hair. I immediately jumped to my feet, examining my naked, hairless body with my hands. It was all gone bar my head hair, which seemed to be brushed smooth and lengthened until the ends tickled my neck. I quickly wanted to find the underlying cause of this so I grabbed my dressing gown and angrily marched downstairs. I found Faye in the sitting room, watching soaps as she sipped on a cup of coffee.

"Oh, good morning, sleepy-head," she said with a welcoming smile. "Or should I say good afternoon? I didn't keep you any breakfast because I thought you'd want to skip ahead to lunch seeing as it's – oh gracious me, it's nearly two o'clock!"

Baffled by her forthright nonchalance, as if absolutely nothing was out of the ordinary, I marched right up to her and towered over her to assert myself. "Why the fuck did I just wake up feeling – ugh! – why have you done this to me?"

"Don't you dare use that language!" said Faye, abruptly slamming her cup on the coffee table. "Not in this house!"

“Oh my god, I’m almost twenty-three, I can bloody well curse, especially when I’m demanding to know why my Mom sneaked into my room and -,” I immediately stopped mid sentence, losing my train of thought, as humiliation flushed my cheeks scarlet. I addressed Faye as Mom for the first time in, well, ever. “I - I - um - sorry, I didn’t mean to -,”

Faye’s eyes lit up like two sparkling candles, as she joyously linked her hands to her lips. She was clearly overjoyed with my embarrassing misstep of words. I felt like a child. “It’s okay, sweetheart,” she said, standing up to face me a little closer. “I’m sorry I had to shock you like this. Don’t you like it?”

“Not particularly,” I said, feeling utterly mortified, but no less furious. “I honestly don’t know what to say. I’m at a loss for words!”

“But don’t you like the way it feels?” said Faye, standing up to match my height, her heels giving slight dominance over me. “Did you not feel oh-so-comfy when you woke up, feeling the soft cotton sheets caress your skin? Did it not take you back to when you were a boy?”

She was right, but I didn’t want to admit it. Other than that, I felt really disturbed by her strange and manipulative demeanour. “It appears I’m the only one here who finds this odd as fuck. I can’t believe you’d think this sort of thing is normal.”

“Lots of men shave their body hair these days!” said Faye, impatience entering her tone. She was trying her best to hold it together. “What makes you any different?”

“Good for them, but that doesn’t mean I should too!”

I said, raising my voice. I could feel my temper going awry so I paused to recollect myself. I didn't want to ruin what I had with Faye. "Look, it doesn't matter, I just want to know why you would do this to me without my permission. I want to understand your deranged thought process behind all this, that's all!"

It was clear I hit a nerve deep within Faye. I could see the hurt swallowing up the joy in her eyes, as she pushed by my shoulder, averting her eyes in an attempt to hide the tearful wounds from my line of sight. I could hear her quietly sobbing, as her muffled footsteps carried up the staircase and into her room. I was left standing there, feeling terribly guilty and wondering if I had overreacted. No, I was in the right. She was way out of line and shouldn't be forgiven just because she turned on the waterworks. It's a manipulative cop-out for any argument.

Oh boy if only my resolve was strong. I didn't speak to Faye for days after the incident, spending no more than a couple of seconds in the same room if need be. She too was ignoring me and I was fine with that until I felt my will weaken.

As the days turned into weeks, I went through a variety of emotions that initially started with anger. After I calmed down, I wondered why she did it. I spent most of my time pondering this, but I was driving myself crazy trying to reach a conclusion.

Then I felt bad for upsetting her. Perhaps she was just trying to help me to relax. Regardless, her intentions were quite skewed and far from normal. I did like how smooth my skin felt, but that didn't mean I should keep it that way. I wasn't a child. I was a man! But why did I feel so guilty?

After quite some time of ignoring each other, I attempted to make some peace so we could move on from the pointless fighting. Everything had been going so well and I wanted to get back to that before it was too late. I had nobody else but Faye and I wanted her love again. It was a very warm day, the sun was splitting the rocks when she was lying out in the back garden, dressed elegantly in a loose, black-and-white polka-dotted dress and sunglasses. I approached, nervously twiddling my thumbs.

“I’m sorry for everything.”

Faye’s stony expression did not budge. She took a long sip from her strawberry daiquiri. The wait was agonizing, to say the least. “It’s okay,” she said in her most deadpan tone. “I’m a grown woman. I’ll get over it.”

“Do you mean that, though?”

“Of course, darling,” she said, finally meeting my gaze.

“Look, I’m truly sorry for upsetting you. I was just shocked when I woke up to – I – I didn’t expect it, it just came out of nowhere and –,”

Faye whipped off her sunglasses, revealing her eyes to be gleaming with something that looked like joy. “Are you trying to tell me that you’re okay with what I did?”

“What – no, I just –,” I stopped midsentence when I noticed Faye’s red raw eyes illuminate for the first time since I accidentally called her Mom. Words caught in my throat, I tried to think of a reasonable answer, but all I really wanted was for us to stop fighting so

we could go back to the way we were. “I mean, yeah, I guess so but –,”

“Oh Brian, that’s just wonderful!” beamed Faye, jumping to her feet and bringing me into an embrace. It was as if we immediately picked up where we left off before the fight. She wrapped her arms around me, whispering, “Thank you,” into my ear.

I could not help feeling deeply disturbed. At that very moment, I knew I had to get away from Faye by finding a job and a place of my own, preferably as soon as possible. I was living too comfortably with her insistent mothering. Wishing that my body was bereft of hair was more than enough to make me suspect her sanity. I had to leave for my own sake.

### 3.

Over the next two months, everything fell back to the way things were. It was mid-October, with leaves spilt around the house like coloured pencil shavings. The piles, dicing the garden into neat, unfair portions, and me, stuck inside with no prospect of a job anytime soon. I blamed the economy, but I mostly blamed my criminal record. I spent every night on the internet, submitting my CVs to as many job vacancies as possible. I did this under Faye’s radar, mainly because I felt she would disapprove.

It was nice that Faye and I were growing closer each day, a little too close I might add, but I also noticed we had become increasingly isolated from the outside world. Faye had everything from groceries to household appliances delivered right to the doorstep.

When I asked when she would be returning to work, she just told me she was taking extended leave.

Despite being closer to her, I dared not ask why she was taking so much time off in case she took another turn for the worse. That was the last thing I wanted.

Faye continued to brush my hair every day, insisting that I refrain from getting it cut. It didn't make much of a difference whether I cut it or not because I barely left the front gate anyway, but admittedly, I was growing tired of having to brush the hair away from my line of sight.

My body remained bare and smooth as can be, but I also noticed my skin was physically softer, tenderer, and less coarse. I guessed it was a result of the scented baths she made up for me every day. I couldn't fathom why she insisted on keeping me this way. I couldn't get out soon enough.

One day, when I was helping Faye wash up after lunch, the telephone rang for the first time in weeks. I quickly acted and dashed to it before Faye could even think about picking it up. I was hoping it would be someone calling about a job interview, and I was right, it was. The call was from the manager at Cost Savers, a local supermarket in town that I applied to a few weeks ago. The lady on the phone wanted to see me for an interview the following morning and I gleefully accepted, noticing the concerned look on Faye's face as she watched me, arms crossed, and leaning against the kitchen door frame.

"Who was that?" she asked, trying her best to sound nonchalant.

"That was the manager from Cost Savers downtown!" I said excitedly. "They want to see me for an interview tomorrow morning. Isn't that great?"

After a long, cold pause, Faye forced a crooked smile,

and said, "Of course, sweetheart. That's wonderful news."

She was clearly saddened so I walked over to her, riding on a surge of confidence, and hugged her. Even I was surprised in doing this. "Everything will be fine," I said softly. My nose filled with the strawberry scent of her hair. "If I get this job, I promise nothing will change. You can't even begin to imagine how much I appreciate what we've built over the past few months, but it's time for me to get by on my own steam and move on. Faye I -,"

Faye broke from my embrace and pushed herself away from my grasp, tears welling up in her eyes. "I thought it was Mom," she said, eyes burning as she turned and left through the kitchen. She left me in silence so I could contemplate my thoughts. Once again, I felt emotionally blackmailed, but I knew we would both have to adjust if I was to get the job. I felt terrible when I knew I shouldn't. I had to move on and start a fresh life of my own.

Dinner was very quiet that evening, with nothing but the sound of cutlery scraping and clinking against the plates and the howling wind outside. Faye finished hers first and quietly left without words. With my appetite suddenly vanquished, I sat there spacing about for about ten minutes, pondering how I should deal with Faye. I didn't want to fall into her trap by playing her emotional mind games again yet I desperately wanted to resolve our differences. I had to stay strong, and resilient. I could not give in by saying what she wants to hear.

That was when my vision dimmed and my sense of smell heightened, which made my stomach tremble with terrible nausea. I could smell everything. I



clambered to my feet, chair scraping against the floor, as I felt blood rushing to my ears. My head suddenly felt too heavy for my body. Before I could steady myself on the table, I felt the floor rise up and smash against my face, plunging me deep into nothingness.

#### 4.

I felt like I was in the basement forever. I was surrounded by near darkness, chained to a metal pillar that helped keep the house upright. The only way out was through the door at the top of the wooden staircase, which was locked and barricaded from the other side. I had no food, no water, and no bed. I sat up, but scrunched into a ball, rubbing my arms together for warmth. Yet no matter how hard I tried; the cold always managed to get underneath my clothes. I was so hungry that my stomach ached. The inside of my mouth felt like sandpaper. I needed food and water before I seriously harmed myself.

I kept thinking about the note Faye had left beside my head when I woke up. I'm sorry it had to come to this so soon but if I don't have your further compliance then you shall remain down here until you're thinking more clearly. Now I really knew the truth, I was being held prisoner by my own stepmother, but for what cause? Did she not want me to leave that badly or did she want something else? My instincts told me it was the latter, which deeply unsettled me to the core. If she was willing to blackmail me with my own health and safety, then what she really wanted had to be something big and special.

I missed my interview at the supermarket, which infuriated me. I spent hours shouting and screaming just to piss Faye off, but it led to nothing. I had Dad's stubbornness so I was willing to wait there for as long

as possible, just to spite the crazy bitch.

However, that changed late into the second day when the emptiness in my stomach hit me hard and painfully. My belly gurgled and grumbled in protest as sharp stabs reigned havoc around my abdomen, bones trembling and creaking under the weight of the meat and muscle it held together so tightly. My lips, which I could barely open, were scabbed and dry.

The game was over. I knew the only way out was to comply with whatever Faye wanted so I used what little strength I had to shout, "Okay I'll do whatever you want! Just let me out of here!"

Unsure if she even heard me, I shouted repeatedly until finally heard movement from upstairs. After listening to the barricade being removed and the door unlocking, light poured into the basement, blinding me senseless, and Faye was nothing but a silhouette gliding down the stairs – a dark angel descending to take my hand. She unchained me and practically carried me up the stairs with my arm thrown over her shoulder.

My vision was blurred so I could barely see as she led me through the house and up the stairs with immense struggle. I asked several times for water but she only said, "In a moment, dear." I didn't have the strength for impatience, only desperation. She brought me into the bathroom, shaved, and bathed me. I drank some of the water despite it being layered with sweet-smelling lotions and my own dirt.

After that, she sat me on the toilet seat facing away from her. I could hear rummaging before she removed the towel from my head. She began combing my hair, pulling it out with sharp tines before wrapping a

section with something hot, repeating this many times until all of my hair was covered. As my vision slightly improved, I was startled to see the flash of scissors as dark auburn hair floated down my face. I tried to get up but a firm hand on my shoulder held me down.

Next, I was taken into Faye's bedroom where I collapsed onto the bed naked. She pulled me up again, telling me to stand still while she fetched something from her closet. I stared at the mirror on her wall, utterly dazed out of my mind, barely noting that my hair had been dyed and cut into a feminine do. I felt something wrap around my waist and cinch until the breath was driven from my lungs. I then felt tight underwear being pulled up my legs, which sunk into uncomfortable places, followed by my legs being encased in soft, flimsy material that felt oddly sensual against my smooth skin.

I immediately let myself fall back onto the bed after Faye gave me permission to do so. As I gazed at the ceiling, I thought I was going to pass out again, but the jangling and clanging sound of chains snapped me back into the waking world. I could feel my feet being played with and something being attached. I was soon fed some oatmeal by a spoon, albeit forcefully. Even though it warmed my cold, beaten belly, it still hurt all the same for I hadn't eaten in days. I gulped down a lot of water and I immediately felt better albeit exhausted. The last thing I remembered seeing and hearing was Faye, standing over me, smiling. "Don't worry, sweetheart," she whispered. "We'll build you back up soon. You won't even know yourself."

I was growing tired of waking up, feeling awful, and not knowing where I was. This place, however, was underneath my own soft, heavy blankets. I was warm but there were so many parts of my body aching that I

didn't know which one to address first. My waist was sore, not only because of the hunger but because of the corset clinching it. I threw the blankets off, shocked to find my legs adorned with black, transparent hosiery. I was also wearing a pair of four-inch heels that were attached to a pair of steel shackles, chaining my feet close together.

I panicked and took a step forward, tripped over the tangled chains, and slammed against the wooden floor. I slowly picked myself up, groaning in pain, as I sat up straight against the side of the bed. I was panting, feeling like there was not enough air getting into my lungs. I touched the corset, seeing if I could reach the fasteners from behind but to no use. It compressed my straight waist into something of a slight hourglass. I wanted answers, not soon, not later, but now. I weakly clambered to my feet, trying my best to retain balance over the lofty heels. The chains forced me into taking small steps towards the door, which suddenly flung open, and there stood Faye.

"I thought I heard a bang," she said causally. "Oh darling, are you okay?"

In that instant, I looked right at her, stunned by her undisturbed blasé, so false, I couldn't help but laugh. "You drugged me and locked me in the basement for days without food and water because –," I stopped because I could not hold in my laughter. It was too ridiculous. "You locked me in the basement because you want me to look like a woman! Now – and now you're asking me if I'm okay?"

Faye did not expect this reaction from me, and to be honest, neither did I. Feeling beyond exhausted and frustrated with the past few days, the only sane thing I could do was laugh. She backed away, as she

seemingly feared my apparent lack of understanding. She wanted me to be scared.

“If you wanted me to dress up like a 19th-century whore, you could’ve just asked!” I laughed.

“I’m not asking you to do anything!” Faye shot back, strutting forward to face me closer.

“You don’t get to decide anything here but –,”

“So tell me, were you always crazy or is this just a recent thing, because if I remember correctly, you’ve always been a bit of a cunt.”

Faye smacked me across the face, hard and brutal. The pain filled my entire head. Nursing my sore cheek with my hand, I turned and said, “I thought you had changed but you’re much worse than I remember.”

“Oh please, did you really think I could ever love you after what you did!”

My heart dropped. She knew where to attack me and it was already working. “Stop right there,” I said coldly. “This is completely unwarranted so don’t you dare talk about –,”

“Oh don’t talk about how you STOLE from me and ended up killing a girl in the process!”

Faye had backed me into a corner. I had nowhere to run. She moved in closer, taking my chin in her fingers so she could look right into my eyes with force.

“I don’t understand how you can live with yourself,” she said, eyes wide and shaking her head. “How do you do it, Brian?”

I could feel the horrible guilt spilling from my eyes once more. Such heavy pressure was inflicted upon

my chest. I thought I was going to suffocate under it. "I've wondered that every day since that morning," I said, voice cracking under the immense pressure in my throat.

"You must feel inconsolable," said Faye, leering into my eyes.

I nodded.

"Angst-ridden?"

"Yes," I said, quietly sobbing.

"Accountable?"

I nodded and I closed my eyes, spilling even more tears down my cheeks. "...y-yes," I said. I couldn't fathom where all the recent waterworks were coming from. Control had certainly shifted.

"Oh Brian," said Faye, stroking the tears away from my sore cheek. "I'm so sorry if I led you to believe that I could love you like a son, but I'm afraid I don't love what you are, rather, what you could be. This brutish, reckless criminal that you once were, you should cast him aside and start over."

"But I don't want this."

"No, I don't expect you to, but if you put your trust in me then I promise that I can guide you towards a better life, a life without memory of the past, a life you could learn to love. Isn't that what you want?"

I had no idea what to say. I was all over the place, feeling like my thoughts were scattered in several different places at once. All I could feel was pure woe

and it was inexcusable.

“You don’t want to let the past win by slowly consuming you, do you?” said Faye, impatiently throwing her hands up. “You don’t want the authorities to find out you’ve been dealing again?”

At first, I didn’t understand, as if my brain short-circuited and needed to be rebooted. Around me, everything was fast-forwarding while I was motionless in the middle of it all.

Then, as if a light bulb switched on in my head, I realized she was threatening to frame me for dealing if I did not comply. Words caught in my throat, I tried to protest, but she already had me under her thumb.

“Y-You can’t do that!” Instantly I regretted sounding like a child.

“After the past few days, would you dare question what I’m capable of again?” said Faye, serious as ever. “The only choice I’m giving you is how you want to deal with this, the easy way or the hard way.”

Turning on her heels, Faye left my room, victoriously looking over her shoulder with a wry grin. She was warning me. I stood there in my room, feeling utterly ridiculous in my corset and heels. I sat down and attempted to remove the shackles with all my might, but it was useless.

I noticed something engrained on the inside of the shackle around my ankle. It was a little red light, flashing. I had no idea what they looked like but I was sure it was a tracking device. Fuck. I squeezed and pulled at the high heels until I had no strength left, falling back onto the bed, and feeling wheezy.

There seemed to be no way out of Faye's twisted game, but I was certain I could escape somehow. The main issue was money. I had to get out of the house without her noticing but that would be near impossible since she was always by my side, and if I'm being tracked, she could easily hunt me down. The only option now was to play her little game, at least for a while, until I had the resources and finances to prepare an escape. She can't win. She won't win.

## 5.

In November, winter arrived after lacerating hurricanes and whining winds had come and gone, leaving a terrible calmness for weeks on end. The skies above the house were an unholy mixture of shale-grey and pasty streaks. Callous winter was stifling the world with its icy breath, and I was beginning to feel it creep into my miserable little existence.

Shortly after our bitter confrontation, Faye completely cut us off from the outside world by ridding the house of all communication, including the telephone, cell phones, and the internet. I guessed she was hiding these from me so I could not seek help for my house arrest. She always had the doors and windows locked; only opening them when deliveries arrived. I was sure she was keeping an internet modem somewhere.

Every morning, I would have to wake up at eight o'clock and take my morning bath before being forced back into my corset and heels. After that, I would go downstairs and help Faye make breakfast, wearing only a crème chiffon bathrobe for the whole day as if I were attending some sort of leisurely spa. More like a horror house. Then, the lessons commenced.

Faye insisted I had to wear the heels and corset not



only to shape my body but also to improve my posture and feminine manner. She made me walk around the house, balancing a book on my head so I could learn to be “graceful”, as she so often put it. My stride was limited to shorter steps than I was used to due to the restrictive chains, but I knew that was her intention.

I felt like a fool, parading around in ridiculous attire while she supervised my every move. “No no no, stop what you are doing,” she would frequently bark. “You’re moving your shoulders too much. Girls use their hips to guide their stride. You need to be more fluid with your movements.”

I stumbled, fell over, and nearly twisted my ankle several times until I showed the slightest improvement.

Unfortunately, my lessons weren’t limited to learning how to carry myself more effeminately. I was taught how to cook, clean, and sort out the laundry into different washes, as though I were attending a home economics class in the 1950s. It was utterly ridiculous, but with the threat of being framed for dealing firmly gripping my shoulder, I grudgingly complied. I learned about female hygiene and how to apply makeup, but I have “a lot of progress to make”, as Faye put it. As if I cared that I couldn’t apply makeup. It didn’t compute.

I was also expected to be versed in dozens of books, magazines, and all sorts of girly literature, forcing me to learn about everything from the latest pop stars life stories to teen romance novels. To be sure that my brain was absorbing all the information, Faye made me write up summaries and reports. If I failed the assignment, I would have to reread the material until I knew it cover-to-cover. It was tough, but despite the tedium, reading those novels felt like a form

of escapism, even if they did make me cringe. The magazines were just awful.

What I watched on television also changed from drama and sports to teen soaps and trashy reality shows, and like everything else, I was expected to report. The house was always filled with the latest chart music, blaring on the stereo, and repeatedly playing until I knew the lyrics of every song. It was torturous because they all sounded the same to me, but they were irritatingly catchy. I felt like I was losing my mind because all I could think about were girly things when I didn't want to.

I knew my food was being spiked with something, as I constantly felt fatigued and trapped in a sort of a hazy blur. I was aware of my surroundings, but I never felt truly present. My mouth was constantly dry so my fluid intake increased, which subsequently led to constant bathroom trips. There were times when I felt nauseous, the world spinning me out of balance, and not just because of the heels. Other times I just felt a swell of tears in my throat. However, this numbness that started to prevail didn't steer me away from my goal of escape, but I remained conscious of how far I had to sink into femininity.

Faye was literally beside me every moment of the day. She made me sleep in her bed every night with the shackles still around my ankles, tracking device intact. Sometimes, in the darkest of the night, I would quietly and skilfully leave the bed to search the room for the house keys, but to my often-felt disappointment, I never found them.

Another night, I learned where my boundaries lay when I managed to pick the lock of the back kitchen door. It took many nights of trial and error, but I

succeeded triumphantly. You cannot begin to imagine the relief I felt when I heard the lock clicking, but the moment my foot set out into that cold, snowy night, I heard a sharp noise ring from upstairs. I felt my stomach flip over as if I were about to get sick. The light on my tracking device was rapidly bleeping. My first instinct was to run as fast as my shackles would allow me. I scuttled through the garden, frost engulfing my legs, as I trudged through two feet of snow, getting deeper the further I got away from the house. Teeth chattering, arms together, I was already freezing to the bone.

Basked in darkness, I walked right into the tall fence at the back of the garden. I jumped, attempting the grab the top with my hands, but I failed spectacularly. A sharp pain shot down my back. I tried again several times, realizing that momentum was impossible in a corset and heels. Blinded by the beam of a flash light, my captor's hand grabbed me by my hair and dragged me back towards the house.

I kicked and screamed as loudly as I could into the dead of night, hoping, praying that somebody might hear me. She towed me through the utility, violently shivering, and awkwardly staggering like a newborn foal. She threw me into the basement without saying a single word. I was expected to stay there until she felt I was ready to come out, which gave me a lot of time to think about her proposal.

*The only choice I'm giving you is how you want to deal with this, the easy way or the hard way.*

I couldn't hit any lower. I certainly chose the hard way and it was causing me a lot of unbearable pain. I wanted it to stop. Since I got out of prison, I probably cried more than I did in a lifetime. I still couldn't

fathom where my sudden hypersensitivity came from, as I had to deal with far worse abuse in jail. That is until I reached an obvious conclusion, one that I felt was coming for some time.

Faye was spiking my food with hormones all along, but I was choosing to ignore it. I had faith in our blossoming mother/son relationship, which turned out to be nothing more than a trap, and I unwittingly fell into it. How could I always be so naïve? I convinced myself that she wasn't capable of such things, to permanently alter my appearance and brain chemistry, to turn me into the daughter she could never have.

I was stupid to trust her turnaround after she treated me with such disdain all my life, but I was paying for it now, the hard way, as she labelled it.

At that moment, it seemed like the best option for me would be to consider taking the so-called easy way, at least for a while until another escape opportunity arose. I wondered if I was lying to myself yet again, as a means to convince myself that there was hope left when there was none.

Jess crept back into my thoughts with harsh intensity. No matter how hard I tried, she was always there in the shadows of the basement, waiting for me to fight a battle I had no chance of winning. I felt like I was losing my mind. The guilt ate away at me, changing me, and making me feel like I deserved it all. There was no escape from her face – no forgiveness, no chance, no redemption, just guilt.

I spent over a day in the basement when my punishment was surprisingly cut short. Faye took me straight to the kitchen where she had some bread and cereal waiting for me. I jumped at it right away,

shovelling, and slurping the breakfast into my mouth. Faye looked like she had a bad taste in her mouth while she watched me eat. Eyes ablaze, she grabbed my chin and forced me to look at her the second I finished eating.

"I've just given you ONE strike," she said, leering. She scraped my chin with the pointed red nail of her thumb. "There won't be another. What you did the last night was unforgivable. I should cast you out onto the streets and let hoodlums have their way with you!" Her eyes were swimming in tears as she played with my chin. "I clearly explained to you that it didn't have to go down this way, but you had to make this tougher for the both of us. You just had to spoil what was to come. Do you think I enjoy hurting you, do you?"

Initially, it seemed like she didn't enjoy it and she was telling the truth, but I did not want to make the same mistakes all over again by trusting her. So I just told her what she wanted to hear. "No," I said coolly. "No, I don't think you do."

"Well then!" she bellowed, letting go of my chin. "You ought to learn something from this. Please don't put us both through this again, especially today."

"What's today?"

Faye dipped her hand into a black bag and threw out a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt, the very outfit I left prison with over four months ago. "Get dressed," she said lowly. "We have to go to the dentist this morning. I forgot you were getting your braces tightened today. It completely slipped my mind. We're late, hurry up!"

It was strange being back in my old clothes after being accustomed to silk and satin for some time. Gazing

into the mirror, I suddenly noticed that I looked a lot softer compared to when I left prison. My skin was excessively smooth and a little too clear for a man of my age. My dark auburn hair was almost tickling against my shoulders, shinier and silkier than it once was. I tied up the hair, hiding it underneath a hat, as per Faye's instructions. I had to be myself for the day. It messed me up inside.

Even stranger than wearing my regular clothes again was being outside for the first time in months. We were in the darkest of winter, but my eyes still took time to adjust. I still had my tracker hidden from view further up my trouser leg so I wouldn't be able to run. The second we shut the car doors, the locks went down, preventing me from any desire to leap out and escape. Faye wore her anxiety as obviously as her loud, red a-line skirt. She was nervous about taking me outside, understandably so since I was technically her prisoner. I could easily alert a passer-by of what she was doing to me.

Despite having some breakfast, I still felt incredibly weak and malnourished. When we parked the car outside the dentist, Faye unlocked her door, walked around the bonnet, and took me out of the car with an extremely firm grip on my hand. I grunted in pain, but she refused to loosen her grasp until the nurse called me into surgery. She followed me in, much to the nurse's protest, but she insisted that she be near me at all times. She wasn't going to risk leaving me alone with anyone.

A new wire was inserted into my braces before being tightened, making me wince with discomfort. I couldn't keep my eyes off Dr Bisley. After all, he was the first person I saw in months. I could feel a war of loyalties brewing in my head. It was the perfect

opportunity to expose my stepmother for what she was doing to me.

After I rinsed my mouth of the foul glue, I felt a surge of confidence rise from within. However, such hopes were quickly diminished when I caught a glance of Faye warning me with her ferocious glare. It was like she could read my mind.

“So when are you going to re-open your practice, Faye?” Dr Bisley asked as he pulled his rubber gloves from his hands. “Not for some time, Robert, but when I do, I’m afraid it will be in a different town.”

“You’re moving?” said Dr Bisley, shocked. He genuinely seemed taken aback. “But you’ve been practising in this town for years. You’re one of the best. Why leave?”

“I guess Brian and I could do with a change.”

Deeper, the urge to shout fell, until I could no longer handle it. I could feel a freight train running through my chest, my palms clammy, and my head spinning out of control. I looked at Faye, who sensed I was highly troubled so she quickly thanked Dr Bisley, ushered me out of the surgery, and into the car. I was glad we were going back to my prison, but I wasn’t sure why. I couldn’t stand seeing Faye and me so anxious.

Then, I realized that I was truly silenced with an invisible, intangible, gag in my mouth. Stuck in a pit of self-consciousness, I needed to get out before it was too late. I built up my courage only for it to go south, fearing what might pour out between my lips. I was locked in a miserable cage I had built for myself along with the true feelings I was forced to repress.

“You’re probably wondering why I didn’t tell you we’re moving, no?” said Faye, breaking the silence in the car. I didn’t answer, choosing to stare out of the window with no desire to talk. Faye sighed wearily, as she pulled the car to a halt outside the house. “I’ll keep you in touch with things once this transformation period is over.”

She led me into the house by which time I was forced back into my corset, garter, and heels. I was shocked to find the wires on my braces were now bright pink, just like a teenage girl would be. “You must be famished,” she said, firmly tightening the straps. “I’ll rustle you up something right away.”

I lost my appetite back in the surgery. There was only one thing I felt I could ingest and that was whatever drug Faye slipped into my food to dope me out. Days of hyper awareness did nothing but force me to face the fact that I was weak. So weak that I couldn’t even shout out for help when the opportunity had arisen. Looking down at my body, I couldn’t help feeling humiliated. Were my nipples always that dark, or was it just me, I thought, placing my hand flat on my right pectoral. It felt softer, fleshier, and not quite as solid as I was used to, but only ever so slightly.

This wasn’t good.

## 6.

After a few dry weeks, Christmas arrived with the drop of a single snowflake on the sunroof of my room. Curled up on the wicker chair, sipping hot cocoa in my chiffon robe, I watched the small crisp white flakes of ice slowly drift down from the gloomy skies. My heart moaned because it meant it was the end of a horrible year and the beginning of a new one filled with what I



could only imagine being worse.

Over the weeks, my lessons in girlhood continued with military intensity. Initially, perfecting a feminine walk seemed like an easy undertaking, but there was far more to it than I could have possibly imagined. Faye said I was exaggerating my stride in a cartoonish fashion so she practically dragged the subtly out of me with constant practising, all day every day, among countless other lessons in femininity.

“The reason the high heels are locked onto your feet is to change your centre of gravity and exaggerate the forward curve of your spine. This helps release the hips, which will naturally feminise your movements,” said Faye, walking alongside me to and fro the living room. “Yes, that’s it, remember to keep your shoulders still when you walk because...”

“It forces me to use my hips for balance, I know,” I said moodily.

“Yes, but you keep watching your steps,” said Faye. “A girl always keeps her chin parallel to the ground with her arms kept at her sides. And do try to keep your shoulder blades an inch closer together.”

Wash, rinse, and repeat, it was very much like the routine lifestyle I led in prison. I repeated the instructions until I found my rhythm. I even managed to balance the book on my head for a whole day, gracefully moving from day-to-day tasks until it became unconsciously habitual. Since I was being watched constantly, I was forced into keeping my feminine walk until it became second nature to me, despite how ridiculous I initially felt.

After I perfected my walk, Faye believed it was time

to take control of how people understood me and begin work on feminising my voice. "The body and manner are one thing but it's the voice that makes the girl!" she would say repeatedly. While Faye carefully listened, I would read from my romance novels as she tutored and requested changes in the pitch, dynamic range, enunciation, and finally, body language. When we watched our girly TV shows, she would often pause it, and make me emulate what I saw on screen. My hatred of all this soon morphed into careful subservience so I could get to my one joy at the end of each day, which was sleeping. God did I love to sleep

Seeing as my twenty-third birthday came and went by completely ignored, Faye made more of an occasion out of Christmas day. I awoke that morning and rolled over in the bed to find that she wasn't there, but at her makeup station instead, humming jingle bells, as she applied mascara to her lashes. She was fully clad in a red lace cheongsam with elbow-length sleeves and an above-knee hemline, very Christmassy indeed.

"Oh, good morning!" she said, startled. She came over to the bed, beaming from ear to ear with her arms outstretched, and kissed me on the forehead. "Merry Christmas, sweetheart! Do you want to see your presents?"

Truly, I didn't want to see my presents because I knew they would be some sort of tool to further my unwilling feminisation. So I just said, "Happy Christmas, Mom," because I knew that was what she wanted to hear. I called her Mom now because she would probably freak out if I didn't. I went to the toilet and showered, washing and rinsing my hair with lotions, as I had been taught. When I went back to the room, I knew something special was in store for me when I saw the excited look on Faye's face.

“Come over to the station here so I can do your makeup and hair,” she said, ushering me to the bench with a smile. “I want you to look extra special for today.”

I nervously sat down while she worked on my face, poking, brushing, and dabbing with utter determination. I remembered each step in my head while she applied the concealer, foundation, highlights, depth, contouring, and of course, that little bit of rosy blush. My eyebrows were plucked and thinned with added shadow, whilst my lashes were thickened and enriched with eyeliner and mascara. My lips were cleansed with balm, outlined, and carefully coated with vibrant red lipstick. She proceeded to work on my bob haircut, which was nearly long enough to reach my shoulders at this point. Faye told me to wait by the station so she could fetch my presents downstairs.

Through the corner of my eyes, I glanced at my face in the mirror, and quickly turned away, muttering, “That’s not me. That’s not me,” until I told myself it was only makeup.

Faye came back with a couple of parcels in her arms. She watched me closely as I opened each one. My heart skipped a beat when I tore the paper from the first. Beneath the box lid and wrappings was a black and red plaid party dress with a high waist skirt that flared into an a-line and lengthened to the knees. I looked at Faye, mouth open and knowing that she wanted me to wear it right now. The second present was a pair of red t-strap heels. “Aren’t they gorgeous?” she said, gleaming with joy.

I had no words. At Faye’s request, I hesitantly took off my robe, letting it crumple around my feet, skin bare

and naked. Circling and eyeing me like a work of art, she handed me a pair of crème mesh knickers with a decorative bow on the front. I felt my cheeks getting hotter and hotter, and wondered if my stepmother was as mortified as I was. However, she appeared to revel at the moment I pulled them up my legs and adjusted them snugly around my bum and thighs.

“You’re getting quite small downstairs,” said Faye into my ear, playfully running her fingers through my hair. She hugged me from behind, cupping my chest in a matching padded push-up bra. Stuffing it with some socks and gel pads, she fastened the straps until they firmly held everything in place. “It won’t be long until we have real breasts filling these cups.”

I was traumatised, frozen to the spot, as she tightened the corset around my waist. I looked at the girl staring back at me from the mirror, seeing nothing short of disgust, almost hatred, as her face reddened to the colour of beetroot. My legs refused to move, too shocked, too embarrassed, as Faye pulled the dress down over my head. She adjusted it and pulled it out into neat, elegant portions before pulling up the zipper, and forcing me into the lofty four-inch pumps. No chains were attached but the tracking device was still intact around my ankle.

When I saw the pretty girl staring back at me in the mirror, I wanted the world to crack open and swallow me up. But there was no rescue from this embarrassment. It was absolute, torture, utter humiliation. At that moment, I knew the memory would be seared into my brain forever, ready to pop up and torment me again in my quietest moments. The way my perky bosom poked out, and then thinned around the waist with the skirt flaring out my hips, made me feel sickeningly effeminate.

This wasn't who I was supposed to be.

"From now on, you shall not be known as Brian Philips, but as my daughter, Ms Emily Davenport," said Faye, peering over my shoulder into the reflection. "Actually, Ellie has a nice ring to it, doesn't it? I've always liked that name. We still have a long way to go but I expect you to attend yourself in this fashion from now on. The New Year is going to bring a lot of changes with it, honey, so embrace it, feel girlish, and I promise you contentment."

I spent the rest of the day feeling utterly mystified. It was strange looking down at my bosom while I ate my turkey dinner, which was most likely pumped full of feminising hormones. My exposed arms and legs made me feel self-conscious because of how thin they were. I had to keep my legs together at all times or I would show my knickers underneath. I opened more presents, disappointed once again to find the latest album from Union X, a boyband Faye made me listen to frequently. "I've heard you whistling their hits so I assumed they would be your favourite," she said.

At this point, it was clear that Faye wanted me for a teenage daughter, despite my real age being twenty-three. I sat on the couch in front of the fireplace, stomach full, and head swimming once again. With my back straight and knees together, I listened to Faye play Silent Night on the piano. I sipped some coca-cola, feeling the fizziness sting my eyes. I wanted to drink something stronger but Faye wouldn't allow it.

As much as I tried to hold it in, the shock of everything that was happening to me came out like an uproar from my throat in the form of a silent scream. Beads of water started falling down my cheeks one after another, without a sign of stopping. The world

turned into a blur, and so did all the sounds. The taste. The smell. Everything was gone. It was Christmas day, but in that instance, I yearned for prison. At least I was myself when I was inside.

## 7.

The New Year arrived with the whack of a mallet, thumping down a large *FOR SALE* sign outside the front gate. Through my window, I watched the burly man from the property agency dust off his hands before leaving in a van. I assumed Faye didn't want locals questioning why she suddenly had a teenage daughter, which was why she was selling. That's if she ever allows me to leave the house.

I tried my best to get my head around her motives. If I were to fully transition, what would happen after that? I thought about it so much, concocting countless scenarios in my head until I no longer feared it. I didn't feel anything. I became so hollow and bereft of response that I stopped resisting altogether and made no plans of escape. A part of me told me that I deserved what was happening to me. I hated myself.

The changes in my body seemed to accelerate, as the cold dark winter turned into a dream of spring. My appetite increased as briskly as my manhood shrank. The more I ate over the months, the more weight I gained, but not in the usual places.

Paying attention to the subtle changes was tough, as they developed slowly with time, but now and then, I would catch a glance at what was happening to me. I noticed that my thin, bony arms were filling out with soft, supple flesh along with a few pounds of fat seemingly forming around my hips, rear, and legs. The jagged ends of my bones that had always protruded

through the skin of my emaciated limbs were no longer noticeable but smoothened out into soft, feminine proportions.

Nausea and dizziness became less frequent, leaving me in a simple, stupid state of complete lethargy. I was beginning to forget things, which varied in degree. Sometimes I wouldn't be able to remember what I had for breakfast when I climbed into bed at night. Other times I even forgot what I was going through was far from ordinary.

I didn't mark the time that passed or think about any question in my head. I didn't feel the ageing of the day or even consider the budding breasts that were poking through my shirt. Anything could have happened and I wouldn't have altered by one whit of my fallen attitude. I couldn't even be mad in such a drug-induced state, only grateful that I didn't have to worry about anything anymore.

Or so I thought.

Sometime in what I think was spring, the house sold for a hefty sum of money, which immediately set the next phase of Faye's plan in motion. In the early hours of a nameless morning, she woke me up, urgently telling me to get dressed. "We have a very long journey ahead of us," she said, throwing the blankets from my body.

I got up, rubbed the sleep from my eyes, and asked what was going on, but she simply repeated her orders. She had me put on a pair of black high-waisted jeans that hugged my legs rather snugly with a loose white belly top and flats. She led me to the car and we drove for hours on end until we eventually reached a private estate with tall, red-bricked walls encircling it.

“Hi there,” said Faye, speaking into the intercom by the gate pillar. “Faye Davenport speaking, I have an appointment booked with Dr Ford.” There was a cackled pause from the intercom. “Yes, come on up, Ms Davenport,” said a distorted female voice. “He’s expecting you.”

I had ideas of what was about to happen, but I didn’t want to acknowledge them. I was dazed out of my mind, feeling tranquil yet weak, as the colours of the neat, floral arrangements up the driveway swirled and melted into one another. I was out of my mind, and despite the severity of my situation, my inhibitions and fears were dampened. There would be no escape attempt today. The next thing I remember was the smell of ink and a marker stroking across my face. Through my hazy, blurred vision, I recognized the man who was drawing on me, but I couldn’t pinpoint where I saw him before.

I started to feel scared. I asked several times where I was, but I received no answer. I was stripped of my clothing, gowned, and wheeled down a clinical corridor with my head hanging backwards, and lights flashing by my eyes. “Wh-what is going on?” I slurred, feeling nauseous, as we took a sharp corner turn. I was assisted out of my chair and placed on a surgical bed. “I don’t want to be here,” I said.

Were the words coming out of my mouth or was I just thinking them? “Please stop, I don’t want this. Please.” Eyes rolling around in every direction, I caught a glimpse of Faye, looking on from behind a glass shield with an indomitable look on her face. This was bad; this was really, really bad. The vaguely familiar doctor’s face swam into view above me, placing a mask on my mouth, and forcing me to inhale the anaesthesia until I rose into the light.



I woke up feeling as if no time had passed. Initially, I thought I was at home in my bed, but this felt different, less comfortable, and artificial. The bed sheets felt like they were made of paper. I was in a foreign territory. I rolled onto my side, feeling a slight sting between my legs. Every part of my face ached. I was looking through two eyeholes, suddenly realizing my head was completely wrapped in bandages. Before I could even muster what little strength I had to panic, I felt cool liquid engulf my arm, and I was soon fast asleep once again.

I'm not sure exactly how much time I spent in that clinic but it felt like a long time. I drifted in and out of consciousness, noting what parts of me had changed due to where the pain was located. I didn't have the strength or courage to explore my altered body. My arms and legs were too heavy to move and my eyelids couldn't be lifted higher that would admit through them a small glint from the light above. My facial bandages often became wet with my tears while Faye sat by my side stroking my hand while humming sweet lullabies. I was completely powerless to intervene in my fate.

Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into two months, and soon, I was taken off the drugs and allowed to roam freely around the clinic. I hated my head being so clear so I begged to be put back on whatever the hell Faye had been feeding me for months. However, Dr Ford insisted there was no need for them anymore, only light painkillers. I also finally recognised who he was. He was a disgraced former plastic surgeon who performed illegal operations and was caught in the act years ago. I remembered Faye often spoke of him with revulsion because she knew him in medical school. She certainly did not treat him as such now, instead likening him to a sort of hero.

I seemed to be the only patient in his strange private home-run clinic. I would sit in the recovery room, gazing out onto the green lawns and woodland acreage, feeling numb both physically and mentally. When I saw what he did to my genitals, I quickly slipped into a state of shock that lasted for days. He had removed my testicles but the scrotum remained, hanging loose beneath my tiny two-inch penis. He explained that this was done by the instruction of Faye so that my body would no longer produce testosterone, allowing the increased dosage of hormones to completely feminise me.

When Dr Ford removed the support garment from my waist, he informed me that I had undergone a butt lift to make my rear rounder and more refined. Any slight movement caused me pain whenever I sat, but he insisted that the swelling would go down while the garment helped my skin reset and provide support for the implants. He offered me blind consolation by saying that it was the best work he had done on a patient yet.

The day to remove the bandages from my face arrived with great dread on my behalf, yet Faye was reeling with anticipation. I winced in pain while Dr Ford carefully unravelled each bandage, bit by bit until I felt the air kiss my skin for the first time in weeks. I moved my jaw around, clicking and creaking, as I stretched out my facial muscles. It felt very different right away.

“Oh my,” said Faye, hands clasped to her mouth in shock. She seemed to be getting emotional as tears welled up in her bright, glassy eyes. “Oh, my word.”

“So you like it then?” said Dr Ford, proudly folding his arms.

“I cannot believe I slandered your name for years, Dr Ford. You have serious talent,” said Faye, utterly gobsmacked, as she inspected me closer. “When will the swelling go down?”

“In about two weeks. You’re free to go home and recover if you wish.”

I closed my eyes, trying my best to mentally fly away from that moment. All I could hear was the faint sounds of medical equipment beeping and chiming, while the wind blew through the transparent curtains.

And then, an image of Jess suddenly popped into my head and I wondered what she would think of me now, her killer, standing in a clinic being cooed and awed at for an unwilling transformation. Something told me she would be laughing at me. I deserved everything that was to come. I could not live any longer.

I was taken home to do the rest of my recovery there. I’ll never forget what it was like to stroke my neck, only to realise that my adam’s apple no longer existed, nothing but a seamless swan-like neck. As I sat in the passenger seat, I felt my fingers unconsciously drum against my knee, as if in a rhythmic spasm. I was anxious to see what I looked like now yet I wanted to hold off the reveal for as long as possible. The moment we got back to the house, I marched to the nearest mirror with Faye objecting in tow, persisting that I should wait until I healed, but I could no longer wait.

That was when I saw her...

When I was nine years old, I fell from a tree and plunged down ten feet onto the hard earth. The impact knocked every wisp of air from my lungs, and I lay there struggling to inhale, to exhale, to do anything.

I felt the same horrible sensation overwhelm me at that very moment, trying to remember how to breathe, unable to speak, totally stunned as I gaped at the stranger looking back at me in the mirror.

I looked nothing like my true self. Despite the bruising and swelling, I immediately noticed that my thick, conk-like nose had been narrowed with the nostrils flared and moulded into a button-like form. Cheeks are no longer hollow and thin but filled in with pinchable roundness. My jawline was softer and my chin was less pointed and more curved. My forehead appeared more prominent, vertically rounded, and smooth without stepping. Once I healed, I would look like a young woman.

“What have you done to me,” I whispered lowly. I turned to Faye, feeling my fists clench, and my teeth grinding. I was shaking with unspeakable rage. “You mutilated me. You changed my face. You – you –,”

Faye was scared, which made me all the gladder for it. She took several steps back, swallowing down her fear with a lick of her lips. “Ellie, please, I know you’re upset but –,”

“DON’T FUCKING CALL ME THAT!” I roared, grabbing her by the arms, and shaking her violently. I could see red, and at that moment, I thought Faye looked fragile. “My name is Brian!” I screamed, feeling tears burning my bruised face. “My name is Brian!” I said again, loosening my tight grip on Faye, as an immense sea of emotions crept up my throat.

I collapsed onto the floor in a heap, as if somebody had just cut the strings from my limbs, and I wailed until I could cry no more, eyes raw and voice hoarse.

Sobbing on the ground, feeling like a mess, I repeated the mantra, "My name is Brian," over and over until I felt the slightest shred of calm. Faye joined me on the cold wooden floor and brought me into a warm embrace.

I cried into her bosom, feeling the pain of realising that there was no going back from here on end. Parts of me were crumbling away, leaving me lifeless and hollow, which forced me to think about what would fill in the gap. I wondered if I should just nobly accept my fate and be the girl I was expected to be. It seemed easier than resisting any further.

## 8.

Summer crept across the land, igniting the weeds and grasses that grew on the cracked pavement outside the house. The muggy heat pressed on me, even sweating was no good. It trickled down my neck and back like warm soup. May was always been my favourite month. With the tracking device was removed from my ankle, I was free to roam the grassy gardens as I pleased. I could easily escape if I wanted to but I simply didn't. I myself replaced fear in keeping tabs on any wild impulses that may force me to do something stupid. The thought of upsetting Faye was unbearable.

Parts of my identity chipped away, bit by bit, while the swelling and bruising faded. What emerged from beneath was a face I did not recognise, a face that I found difficult to accept as my own. My heart stopped every time I caught a quick glimpse of my reflection, and sometimes, I had to pinch my arm to remind myself that it was really happening

I spent most nights, mourning my lost manhood, cradling the empty scrotum between my legs while

I quietly sobbed. My penis was so small, measuring no larger than an AAA battery. I would never father children, nor would I ever be physically turned on ever again, which only increased my numbness to it all.

I was beginning to lose sight of why all of this was happening to me. It was hard to convey such a feeling in words, but I felt like I only had experiences rather than memories now. I was grasping onto some vague feeling of resistance that I couldn't quite understand

Faye knew I was going through a tough time, but that didn't mean the lessons ceased. I continued practising my voice and mannerisms every day until it became unconscious and part of my everyday life. Despite knowing the lessons pushed me deeper into girlhood, they still distracted me from being alone with my thoughts. Ironical, I know. My walk was flawless, further enhanced by my butt lift, which took a lot of time to get used to, underwear feeling ever so tight against my rear and hips. My hair now lengthened down to my shoulders while my budding breasts developed into an A-cup. I no longer had to wear my corset, as my waist had been thinned down to a fine twenty-five inches.

We moved out in late May, packing all our furniture and belongings into one large truck. I didn't feel a shred of sadness for my childhood home when pulled out of the driveway for the last time. I was happy to see it vanish in the rear-view mirror. We drove for nine long hours until we reached a vast seascape that displayed the magnificent sun setting over the purple horizon.

The welcoming sign into Hazlebrook proudly claimed the oncoming seaside settlement to be "The Tidiest Town in the World," which was certainly no

exaggeration. Lush greenery and blooming flowers filled in all spaces that were not occupied by neat, well-kept businesses and houses. It was quaint and peaceful, and everyone looked like they were garbed in their Sunday best.

“Isn’t this an adorable little town, Ellie?” Faye cooed. Indeed, it was. We drove down the seafront, which was filled with typical resort businesses such as arcades, casinos, ice-cream parlours, restaurants, and shops.

The faint whiff of seaweed and fish filled my nose. We drove until we reached the last house on the edge of town. It had a crooked stone wall with a rickety old gate at the front. It was large and square, whitewashed and worn, with a bright red door standing out in the centre. Waves crashed and tumbled against sharp rocks on the other side of the road.

The next couple of weeks brought a surprising slice of contentment. My lessons were reduced and moved to a few hours in the evening where I would learn about makeup and clothes. The long hot days were spent painting and decorating the new house, which I enjoyed more than I expected. I wore denim dungaree short shorts and a white boat-necked t-shirt, all splattered with paint. I even found myself trying to hide a smile one day, as Faye and I both lavished the exterior walls with cream paint.

Several deliveries arrived at the house over the course of a few days, packages entering the front door in all shapes and sizes. Some were no bigger than a cereal box whereas others towered higher than a wardrobe. Faye locked herself away in my new bedroom while she carried out the long and careful process of decorating it the way she felt it should be. I was instructed to do some gardening, cutting down the

overgrown lawn until it was neat and tidy. I hunkered down and made some pretty flowerbeds while I listened to my Union X album on my iPod. The music was growing on me because, well, it was the only music I had. And music always helps in times of strife.

I often looked up, pausing for a moment to admire the beautiful landscape. The countryside stretched before me like a great quilt of golden, brown, and green squares held together by the thick green stitching of the hedgerows and the moss of grey stone. It rose and fell like giant waves on a gentle ocean, dotted with distant houses and villages. The sun was a radiant, all-watching eye, its light creeping into every corner, bathing it all in a warm glow.

While I worked, I thought about Dad a lot, wondering what he would think of me at that very moment. He was a good-hearted man who always had my best interests put before his own. In some respects, I do believe that my Mom was always his one and only true love. I could never imagine him writing a song like that for Faye, especially if he knew what she was doing to me.

But the dead cannot hear what's happening in the living world. I turned my attention back to the garden, feeling very depressed, as I dug my trowel hard into the soil. I didn't want to think about my parents nor did I need to think of them. All that mattered was the stupid rock I had to remove from the earth if I were to plant the beautiful lilies I wanted.

## 9.

The house looked splendid inside and out by the time June came around. My room was finished but still out of bounds until Faye felt it was ready for me to see.



One evening, while we ate dinner for the first night in the newly refurbished dining room, Faye went to the kitchen to fetch something. She was excited, which certainly meant doom.

I sat alone, startled, and jumping in my seat when the lights suddenly blacked out. She emerged from the kitchen door, face illuminated by candlelight with a big birthday cake in her hands. She was singing the happy birthday song.

To say I was perplexed would be an understatement. "Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday dear Ellie! Happy birthday to you!" she sang heartily, placing the cake in front of me. It had a big candle shaped like the number sixteen in the middle. "Happy sixteenth birthday, darling!"

With no idea how to react, I chose to feign surprise, as I clasped my hands to my mouth. It was a real, genuine shock, but I think Faye suspected it was excitement. I blew out the candles, feeling my chest tighten, as my knees beneath the pleated skirt trembled. I was handed an envelope and I opened it to find a confusing, rather official-looking document

It took me a moment to cop that it was a legal birth certificate for Ms Emily Davenport, whose birthday was that very same day of June 7th. My new birthday. I had tons of questions, mainly about how Faye managed to get one made. I couldn't think of anything to say, as I just watched seven years get knocked off my true age in the eyes of the law. "Now would you like to see your new room?" said Faye, hands on my shoulder. "Come, come, it's just up the stairs!"

In a state of shock, I was brought to my new room. Walls painted bright yellow and plastered with

posters of boy bands and teen idols, most of which I recognised from all the literature I was forced to read about them. Teddy bears squished into every crevice around the light pink chest of drawers and makeup station, which was stocked full of makeup and hair products. There was also a walk-in closet with the mirror door shut, but the main feature that stood out was the proud, four-poster bed, adorned with yellow polka-dotted dressings with fluffy rugs and mats thrown on the floor around it.

I stepped inside, nose filling with a strong, girlish scent. Feeling woozy, I turned to look at Faye who was reeling in excitement, as she told me the whole story behind decorating it “for my tastes”. I blanked out while she harped on about how many bargains she found online. Feeling as though I were encased inside a bubble of my own, I glided around the room, hand stroking every surface, as I absorbed my new quarters. I tuned in and out of Faye’s babbling until the word *school* caught my attention.

“Sorry, what did you say there?” I said, spinning on my heels. Did I hear that correctly? I thought. I took a few steps closer. “There, just there, what did you say about school?”

“I said that I enrolled you for school in September,” said Faye, a little taken aback. “It’s only normal that a sixteen-year-old girl should have her education like everyone else. Don’t you want to have a decent career later in life?”

There were many things I wished to say at that instant, but I knew it would be pointless to even open my mouth. If I explained that I was a twenty-three old male who already had an education, I would be berated until I spoke no more. If I told her I wasn’t her

sixteen-year-old girl daughter, I would be punished until I could no longer bare the pain. If I told her to stop all this madness at once and let me be my true self, I would be blackmailed until I was whittled down into obedience.

So I just stood there, stiff, and frozen like a statue as I took everything in. I knew I had to escape. There was no time left.

## 10.

I opened my eyes. In the dark stillness, I couldn't see much, but the dim glow of the bedside clock and the vague shadow of the lamp next to it. Half asleep, I fumbled with the covers and stumbled to the bathroom. After emptying my bladder and flushing the toilet, I checked my reflection in the mirror. The haunted eyes and dark circles underneath them made the new, drawn-in face unrecognizable. I waved my hand and the person waved back. *Hello Ellie*, I thought.

I still couldn't believe that the reflection was me. A dozen needles danced their way across my forehead while I washed my hands. I switched off the bathroom light and waited. After my eyes adjusted to the murkiness, I glanced toward the door. Something didn't feel right. I crept down the corridor towards Faye's room, the door wide open. Even before my mind registered the flatness, I knew she wasn't there.

*Was she really gone?* Flipping on the overhead, I scanned her room. Wallet and keys peeked out from the jumbled pile that overflowed from an oversized purse turned on its side. I glanced at the open closet near the door. Everything hung straight and level, except for a gap where her dark, leather coat should have been.

I checked the clock. It was just past two o'clock in the morning. Where could Faye have gone at this late hour? Quickly, I ran downstairs to find that she was nowhere to be seen. I called out her name, but I was only met with silence.

Heart leaping up my throat, a plan quickly formulated in my head, a desperate plan, which I knew needed a lot of thought before implementing. However, there was no time left for careful planning. I had to escape that night while she wasn't there.

I ran upstairs, dressing in the only clothes I could find, a pair of white high-waist skinny jeans and a boat-necked crop top. I grabbed her purse and then darted down the stairs and ran out the front door like a bullet.

The crisp night air filled my lungs, invigorating me, and urging me to run as fast as my legs could take me. My newly rounded bum swayed and my chest jiggled. Running certainly felt a lot different with extra jigglie parts. I felt weaker and frail, but my mind was racing faster than my feet, panic driving the sheer force of the adrenaline pumping through my veins. I didn't stop until I reached the town, skulking down a dark alleyway to keep out of sight.

As I slowed down to catch my breath, an unsettling feeling welled inside me. There was something wrong, but I couldn't quite tell what it was. I felt as though I had entered a house with the gas stove left on; the atmosphere was dense and strange, rational thought invisible to my eyes. It was my first time outside of Faye's grasp, alone, and appearing as a girl. I didn't expect to feel so scared and vulnerable. A part of me wished I hadn't run away. I looked back at the way I came, feeling compelled to tread back. At least I was

safe at the house with Faye.

I tried to imagine the look on her face when she realised that she let me run away from under her nose. It was a satisfying yet oddly pitiful picture to imagine. So I kept running until I found the bus station where I discovered that they didn't operate in the middle of the night. I hailed a taxi, hurriedly climbing into the cab without a thought of where I was going. I felt like I was jumping from one thing to the next in a blink of an eye. It was surreal. I hadn't moved so fast in years.

"Where to, miss?" the driver asked. I froze, trying to think of a place to go. I had no idea how much money I had so I swiftly rummaged through Faye's purse. The driver was growing impatient. He was clearly a cantankerous oaf who hated working nights. I found over two hundred scrunched up in a ball underneath a packet of maxi pads.

"How far away from Hazlebrook would one hundred take me?" I said, tapping the driver's shoulder with the bills.

The driver looked over his shoulder through the corner of his eyes. I could tell he was suspicious, but I hoped the desperation in my eyes would plead with him to ignore it and take me away from this awful place. After a moment's pause, he took the one-hundred and said, "I guess it would take you to the next town over. It's about fifty miles away."

"Then take me there, please," I said, suddenly realising I was still speaking in my female voice. It didn't feel right to use my own, especially when it did not match my body. The lessons certainly proved effective. "And fast if you don't mind."

The streets lay largely empty – little traffic, few cars, just the occasional drunken pedestrian along the way. Lit only by the moon or the odd street light, the country roads turned liquorice black, fields stretched broader, flatter than a day. The sky looked inkier, and on the hedgerows, the leaves hung greener and glassier against the headlights. Plunged into solitude, I began thinking of where I was headed. I was by no means calm, feeling a layer of sweat cover my skin. Was the outer world always this terrifying?

We drove for about an hour until the car came to a halt outside Milltown. “This is as far as the hundred will take you, miss,” the driver said. I panicked, realising I didn’t wish to leave the safety of the car just yet. The thought of being alone outside was unbearable. I took out another twenty and urged him to take me to the nearest motel. When we arrived, I reluctantly got out of the cab and looked up at a giant neon sign that read *Sleep EZ Motel*.

The streets were barren and empty with the occasional newspaper blowing through the wind. The night air, though cool, was painfully dry and dusty. Nowhere near as clear as the sea breeze of Hazlebrook. The unpainted wooden shop fronts, dilapidated, and closed down were peppered with dry rot, and the most important structure – the motel and the sign, were likely in the same order. None of it looked safe. I did not waste another moment standing in the rough street, choosing to march straight into the reception.

“I’d like a room for the night please,” I said to the bored, sleep-deprived lady behind the desk.

“That’ll be 17.67 for the night but 20 if you want coffee and a bagel in the morning,” the lady groaned. “But I do urge you to choose the latter because I

honestly don't have the brain capacity to count all that change right now."

I handed twenty without another word. When the lady asked me to write my name in the ledger, I hesitated, wondering what I should put down. I didn't want to use Brian or Ellie so I just chose the first name that came to mind. Jess. I was shown to my room where I immediately felt like my human rights were breached. The room looked like it was lived in far too much over the course of twenty-odd years. The walls were yellowed with smoke, the curtains were tatty, the carpet filthy, and the en suite bathroom had an unpleasant smell that was impossible to subdue.

Sitting on the bed for what felt like hours, I eventually climbed into the bed, pulling the blankets over me as I turned to the dark side of the room. I tossed and turned but I just couldn't find the right position. A lingering haze of sleep sat somewhere at the back of my mind but it was too far away to reach, floating in a pool of shock surrounding the events of the night. I finally escaped but what came next terrified me. I had no idea what was to come. The dark consumed me but sleep continued to elude me, divorcing itself from me when it was all I needed to recharge and get through another day of my nightmarish life.

I wouldn't last long on just sixty dollars. I had to go to the police. In fact, I knew I should be at the station at that precise moment, but I needed this. I needed this one night of solitude and safety before I set things in motion. I didn't really sleep, but as morning crept in, I slowly and reluctantly uncovered my face. I blinked, closing my eyes, and blinked yet again. Streaks of sunlight penetrated the window and blinded me. I sat up, dragged my feet off the bed, and rubbed my knuckles onto my eyes. I stretched my arms above my

head and yawned, watching my legs dangle above the stained polyester carpet. It was so gross that I didn't want to step on it barefoot.

I had to keep moving so I quickly packed my things and went for the door. I bumped into someone on the other side, barking, "Watch it," as I attempted to pass around them, but the person grabbed me by the wrist. I looked up, horrified, to find Faye standing there with a vicious look in her eyes that said *kill*.

At that moment, everything around me seemed to fall away. I could no longer hear the distant rush of cars nor the buzzing of the faulty motel sign. It was only she and I, alone in the world, together.

"Don't struggle, Ellie," said Faye, producing a syringe from her pocket.

I staggered backwards into the room, falling hard onto my butt, frozen with terror. It was like I had just fallen into one of my nightmares. She stepped through the doorway, backlit by the sun outside, and quietly loomed over me like the angel of death itself. I did not scream for help because I could not breathe, feeling like someone was squeezing my throat. A choked cry for help forced itself through my lips, and I felt a drop run down my cheek, knowing that this was probably the end of the road for Brian.

## 11.

I awoke sometime later back in my newly refurbished bedroom in Hazelbrook. Faye was sitting on the edge of the bed, watching me closely, stroking my leg back and forth in a rhythmic motion. Eyes fixed upon her, I quickly learned that I was shackled to the bed, too weak to move.



“When you tried to escape the first time, I told you there would be no mercy if you tried such a thing again,” said Faye, coolly eyeing me from head to toe. She paused for a moment, scoffing while she looked to the corner of the room. “You won’t ever be able to run away from me, you know? I can see where you are at all times thanks to Dr Ford’s tracking implants.”

I opened my mouth to speak but she pressed her finger against my lips, hushing me with a shake of her head. “No, don’t ask where he put them because you’ll never be able to figure it out. I have my eyes on you at all times, even when I’m nowhere to be seen. I left you without the ankle bracelet because I wanted to see how long it would take you to try to escape again. Unfortunately, you didn’t last long, as I dearly hoped otherwise, for your sake. In fact, I hoped you’d trust me enough to not escape at all, but I guess I was wrong about you again.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, vision blurring with hot tears. I was surprised because I really meant it. “A – A part of me didn’t want to run, but I kept going because –,” I snivelled back my sobs, feeling like a blubbering mess, “– because I was scared of what you doing to me – of – of what you planned to do with me. I d-don’t want to leave you to go to s-school. It was stupid! I mean, I – I’m stupid, but I’ll learn!”

For a moment, I thought I had softened Faye but her strict, domineering power did not diminish in her eyes. She was cold and shrill in her tone, which made me yearn for her warmth again. I wanted it all to stop. “P-Please,” I sobbed. “I won’t ever do it again, I promise. I want to be your daughter now, I mean it. I just – I just want to feel whole again.”

“You will feel whole again, darling,” whispered Faye,

as she leaned into my face. “That’s what I’ve been trying to show you the whole time but you refuse you listen.”

“W-What do I have to do to make it better?” I plead with all my heart.

“You don’t have to do anything, sweetheart. You need not resist any further and let Mummy take care of everything,” said Faye, brushing the tear-soaked hairs from my face. She straightened herself upright, looking into the corner of her room, as she considered her next words carefully. “You know, I even questioned myself when I thought about completing your transformation, but I’m afraid you’ve left me with no other option. You made your choice when you picked the hard way.”

With that, her eyes quickly darted down to my crotch and then back to my gaze, which I knew could only mean one thing. She nodded, eyes swimming with something dark and lifeless within. I wanted to break through my restraints, not to attack her, no – but to get down on my hands and knees to grovel.

The vulnerable position I found myself in was too much to bear and I struggled, oh God did I struggle, to break free and plead mercy for the last shred of masculinity I had. But she left me alone with nothing else but all the time in the world to contemplate the actions that led me to this life-changing turn.

## 12.

I’ll never forget the first time I experienced the odd sensation of rubbing the inside of my thighs together, only to find that my familiar obstructions were absent. It was shortly after the operation, but I was soon put

back to sleep, a state I wished to stay in forever.

My manhood was gone for good; the last part of whom I once was, was sliced and inverted into something I never imagined having. The pain was bad, but I didn't mind it because I was grateful to feel something.

Faye may have taken away my genitals, but she gave me something else in return. Wrapped around my chest was an assortment of tight bandages that masked the healing breast augmentation underneath. They felt substantially bigger, size C I was informed. They stuck out of my chest like two melons.

Twisting and turning in my clinic bed, trying to get comfortable with my new breasts squeezing together and chafing against the fabric of my gown, it was hard. I hated them with tremendous passion, but not nearly as much as the open scarcity between my legs. My body and I couldn't register the changes.

When I arrived home from Dr Ford's clinic, I spent an inordinate amount of time in my room. When I wasn't sleeping, I was spacing out, desperately clutching to a pillow as though I'd slip away without it. I didn't cry nor did I feel rage, I just felt hollow, which was much worse. I wanted to kill myself, especially in moments when I was bluntly reminded that I was a girl now.

For something as simple as going to pee in the toilet, I would grab at the air where my penis used to be, and look down, the view obscured by my perky bosom. In those moments, I felt intensely unhappy, so much to the extent that I started thinking about suicide options.

I had nothing left of my own, not my life, my gender, or my identity, but that didn't mean I had nothing to

live for.

I'm not sure what urged me to keep on living, but a small part of me told me to make the best of an almost hopeless situation. Perhaps a small part of me recognized this as trauma keeping me in check. Perhaps not, I didn't know anything anymore. The thought of Faye finding my lifeless body, snapping at the neck, and hanging from the closet didn't bring me any comfort or satisfaction. Instead, it made me feel inexplicably sad.

And while the wind danced with the first autumn leaves, dotting in all kinds of beautiful, rustic colours in a great blanket of leaves across the front lawn, I observed the summer rot away before my bedroom window. When I wasn't doing that, I lay in bed, quietly listening to startled birds shoot from empty branches like bullets, twigs snapping and leaves crunching under passers-by footsteps.

I often heard swarms of young people laughing and talking whenever they walked by the house. They seemed so far away. A part of me wished I could ask them inside but I quickly quashed the notion from my mind. I stared at the boy band and pop star posters in my room quite a lot. I had little choice because they literally covered all four walls. My appetite greatly decreased. I never felt like eating. My diet mainly consisted of toast, tea, sleeping pills, and hormones. I was sure my blood was toxic.

The weeks leading up to September brought many changes, most of which I followed through with vacant reception. Faye took the measurements of my new shapely body, from my breasts to my hips and waist. I blindly accepted all the poking and prodding, realising that the worst was certainly over. Resistance really

was futile at this point.

Faye no longer exploded with glee whenever she furthered my feminisation. Now, she was very serious most of the time. I wondered if she felt regret for what she has done to me, but somehow, I found it rather hard to believe. She had come way too far to turn back.

An abundance of brand-new clothes soon arrived with the chime of the doorbell. There was certainly nothing left out. My walk-in closet soon filled up with a vast collection of feminine attire, including skirts, tights, dresses, leggings, jeans, camisoles, blouses, t-shirts, heels, socks, bras, panties, and everything you can think of really. I began wearing female clothes full-time, most of which were fashioned for a girl in her teens. I felt either restricted or lighter in the outfits she forced me to wear.

Nevertheless, I will never forget the first time a bra encased my new breasts, lifting them up into a firm, perky cleavage. When Faye once told me that I would one day have breasts, I refused to believe her, thinking that I would have run away long ago.

Yet there I was, feeling these weighty mounds of flesh squeeze into something neater. It was difficult but Faye assisted me. It should have been utterly humiliating, but I did not feel as such anymore. I was just relieved by the support the bra gave to my back. Wearing panties felt very strange too, particularly when they would pinch where I was cut.

Amongst other changes, my hair now rolled down my back and shoulders like a soft, velvet curtain. I played with it a lot, curling the thick, silky hair in my fingers whenever I had to read my fashion and makeup magazines. This inspired Faye to bring me to the

salon with her one day, which was a curiously sensual experience, to say the least. The feeling of having pointed fingers run through my hair, massaging my tense skull, and smothering it all in sweet-smelling liquids was otherworldly. I almost fell asleep several times, naturally.

“So Ellie, how do you feel about starting school in a new town?” the overzealous stylist asked, snipping away at my hair. Faye told everyone she met that we were new residents of Hazlebrook and that I was her teenage daughter. “Are you nervous? It can’t be easy moving schools when you’re – what age are you?”

I quickly glanced at Faye who was also getting her hair done next to me. She looked vaguely anxious. “I just turned sixteen,” I said in my soft, breathy voice. It killed me to speak in such a manner but my own voice would be an unsettling contrast to my girlish looks. “And I suppose I am nervous, yes.”

Truly, I was. I don’t think the concept of being put back into school had really hit me yet. I was too focused on the changes being made to my body. I was still in a state of shock and denial. Regardless, I knew it would come around soon but I refused to acknowledge it. When September 1st came around, I knew I’d just have to go through with it or Faye would do something unspeakable.

My hair was dyed with rich black balayage and restyled into a cute, free-flowing do with layered seams that lengthened down my shoulders and over my breasts. It brought out a completely different definition to my new feminine face, the ends wavy and my forehead completely covered with straight bangs. Lashes thickened, nails painted pale pink, and makeup applied, I was the perfect image of a teenage girl,

especially when I showed my pink braces through my lips. While Faye and the stylists cooed and awed over my makeover, I stared at the girl looking back at me in the mirror, unable to register that it was really me.

After the salon, we went shopping for clothes and materials needed for school. Faye was quiet, rarely making eye contact, as she flicked through rails of clothes, handing me various items to try on. Her silence continued until we arrived at the house whereupon she went straight to the liquor cabinet and poured herself a drink. I watched her from behind, feeling unsure if I should ask her if something was bothering her.

After spending a few hours hugging my favourite teddy bear in my room, I went downstairs to find her drunk and spread out on the couch. She was a well-composed mess if you get what I mean. "They say you can never really get over losing a child," she said, tone monotonous and demeanour still as a statue. "What does that say about someone who's lost three in a row?" I had no answer so I just stood there, cringing when I found myself giving no response but a slight shrug. I hated the tension.

"Of course, I shouldn't ask you such things," said Faye, tossing her head, as she took another sip of her red wine. "But do you want to know what the doctors told me when I lost my firstborn? They said that miscarriage was so common that one day I'd forget I once had a baby." She stiffly turned her head, eyes bulging as they locked with my own. "How do you say goodbye to someone you never said hello to but loved more than your own life?"

"There's nothing you could have done," I said, mentally beating myself for being so clichéd. I'm

guilty of being terrible at comforting people when they were upset. I hated to admit it, but I couldn't help but feel some empathy. What the hell was wrong with me?

"I was going to call her Ellie," said Faye. She got up, waning back and forth in her tight pencil skirt and heels. She didn't seem to be listening to me.

"Everyone told me I'd get pregnant again, and when I did, I lost my second girl too. By the time the third girl came around, I felt nothing anymore." She walked around the couch, eyes fixed on me as she brushed her hand against the leather. I felt like I was trapped inside an airless tank. "You know, I cannot stand it when people say that everything happens for a reason. Maybe eventually, with time and distance, this becomes more appropriate, but not immediately."

"I'm sorry," I said meekly. I had no idea what to say or how to act.

"Don't be, darling, because I've just woken up from a terrible nightmare," said Faye, leaving her glass on the coffee table and walking straight up to me.

"I'm so grateful that after a lifetime of sadness, you, my beautiful little girl, should come into my life and brighten it so." She brought me into a warm embrace, which I hesitantly accepted with uncertain affection.

"I'm so proud of you, sweetheart," she whispered into my ear. "I love you so much." I stayed in her arms for what felt like an eternity until I suddenly finally settled into her bosom and gently squeezed her back.

My heart was aching.



# PART II

## 1.

The weeks leading up to September brought a lot of anxiety with it. I was to attend an all-girls school on the other side of town with the uniform, the curriculum, everything. I couldn't stop thinking about it. Not only did I fear the mere thought of leaving the house all alone and as a girl, but I also despised the thought of being forced back into an institution that I so passionately hated as a teenager.

In those times, I had to remind myself that I was a teenager again, at least in the eyes of the beholder, and of course, the law itself. I hated everything that came with school – the teachers, the homework, the exams, and getting up early. I had no idea how I was expected to pick up the rest of the curriculum after so many years, especially since I was expected to get a decent career. I never even graduated.

I didn't sleep much on the night before September 1st. In the long night, I spent in bed, I must have woken up several times, breaking my rest into un-refreshing chunks. I opened my eyes and stared at the school uniform hanging primly from my closet door. I felt like it was watching me, beckoning me to come forth into its feminine embrace.

With every disturbance came a new nightmare. I wanted to be absorbed into the darkness that the night promised me hours ago. I wished to wake up feeling refreshed to the warm morning light as the person I was born to be, not some schoolgirl named Ellie. But as usual, my wishes meant nought compared to the harsh reality and unease I felt behind closed lids.

Dread arrived with a slight knock on the door at seven o'clock in the morning. "Time to get up for school,

darling,” said Faye, her voice muffled from the other side.

I was already awake, but I didn’t want to get out of bed. A great blanket of depression fell over me, similar to the kind I felt every morning as a teen when I was forced to get up for school, except this was worse. Much worse. I trudged to the bathroom like a zombie, showered, dried and brushed my hair, and began working on my makeup. I knew Faye would force me to put some on regardless so I instinctively went through each step.

With one leg after the other, I pulled a pair of pink cotton hipster knickers up and over my bum, snugly hugging me with its thin waistband. I pulled out the matching push-up bra, sighing dolefully, as I put my arms through the straps and fastened the buckle with ease. Extending my shoulders back, my breasts heaved into a cleavage with some minor adjusting around the cups. Mystified to observe them as my own, I cupped them both in my hands, pressing them together, inflicting pressure, which sent unusual tremors through my flesh.

I turned on my heels, fear creeping up my spine, as I faced the uniform. I couldn’t believe what I was about to do. I took the cotton blouse from the hanger, running my forefinger across the soft, rounded collar. Putting my arms through each sleeve, I closed the buttons to the very top, one by one, noting how it fit my new bodice, almost tailored to my precise size. I then proceeded to the high waist skirt – it was dark navy and crimson plaid with an above-knee hemline and pleats. I stepped into it, reluctantly quivering, as the polyester brushed against my soft thighs.

Neatly tucking the blouse into the waistband, I drew

up the zipper and tugged the hem. It felt much shorter than it looked. Unrolling the cotton white socks, I stretched each foot into the other and pulled them up my shins until they were below the knee. I then stepped into the brown Dubarry shoes, carefully fastened the crimson and navy striped tie around my blouse collar, and pulled the navy v-necked sweater over my head, proudly displaying the school's coat of arms on the left breast. I turned to the mirror, forcing a toothy smile, as my pink braces glistened against the sunlight bouncing off the mirror.

*How did I let it come to this?* I thought.

I timidly descended the staircase, brushing hair behind my ear, as I bashfully looked at Faye, who seemed to be bursting with pride. She fixed me some porridge, toast, and orange juice, which I simply couldn't finish because of the bees darting around in my stomach.

"Right, it's time to go, darling!" said Faye, putting on her coat. Heaving my floral school bag onto my back, I walked to the front door, feeling as though I were about to take a great plunge off a cliff. Faye smacked my hand from tugging at the skirt hem, informing me that it was as it should be. Inside the car, I couldn't stop trembling.

"Are you cold? Let me turn on the heat for you," said Faye, turning the heat dial to the max.

I wasn't cold. I was so petrified that I couldn't even attempt to stop the tremors in my hands and knees. I looked out the window to distract what was to come, drinking in the vast seascape, as we edged along the coastline. The sun was high and bright, reflecting its orange glow in infinite papules of shimmering light. It was so beautiful that a lump formed in my throat. Or

perhaps that was because I knew I had lost.

Faye pulled up and parked on the main street. She smacked my hand again, which wouldn't stop instinctively tugging the hem of the skirt, as though it were sentient. "Would you stop it!" she snapped.

I looked around the busy street to see that there wasn't a school in sight, only busy market stalls and independent businesses. My chest clenched when I spotted the police station sign a couple of feet away. "W-What's going on?" I asked, taken aback. "I thought I was going to school."

"You can go to school if that's what you wish," said Faye, staring fixedly ahead with her hands still clenched tightly to the wheel. Confused and frightened, I simply waited for her to continue. She then loosened her grip, giving out a heavy, dejected sigh that sounded something like defeat. "Or you can walk into that police station right now and put an end to all of this."

I did not expect this. A flurry of conflicting emotions rose to the surface that absolutely crippled me and further amplified my trembling to near-spastic limits. It was a trick. It had to be. Why go to all the trouble of turning me into a girl only to stop at the finish line? It didn't make sense.

But there were two police officers standing but a mere thirty feet away. All I had to do was get out of the car and I could stop all the humiliation, pain, and trauma with a simple stroke. I looked to Faye in the hope of finding the answer, but her eyes told me she was being truthful. Perhaps I was right in suspecting her guilt.

"I – I honestly don't know what to say."

Faye just shrugged, darting her eyes in the direction of the two police officers, who were now strutting in our direction along the sidewalk.

When I opened the door, an invisible hand clasped over my mouth, adrenaline piercing my heart, unloading in an instant. Why was it such a difficult decision? I felt my ribs heave as if bound by ropes, straining to inflate my lungs.

I was being offered freedom on a plate yet I could do nothing but shake. I glanced at one of the officer's batons and immediately remembered what it was like to have one smash against the back of my head, which was now spinning out of control. I averted my eyes in a fear comparable to the second prior to waking up from a nightmare. I was being tricked. I had to be. Judging from what came before I'd be foolish to fall into whatever snare was in place. I let the police officers pass without a word, but I was still inexplicably torn on what I should do.

I felt the touch of Faye's hand on my knee, which immediately washed a sense of calm over me like a cool, soothing salve. Then she said something I didn't expect, "Brian, do whatever feels right."

And that was when I did something that I didn't expect. I shut the door, thus cleansing all of the indecision and panic that plagued my mind. It didn't matter if Faye was manipulating me.

What mattered was that I was nothing in this world without her. She truly was the God of my universe – all-seeing, all-powerful, and completely in control of my life. She was my mother. She was a part of me and I was a part of her. And like all devotees, I feared her wrath and would do anything to appease her. Negative

feelings were to be feared. Pain was to be avoided at all costs. If that meant not experiencing real joy, then so be it.

“Don’t call me by that name, Mother.”

## 2.

When Mother dropped me outside of the school gates, I couldn’t help but cast my mind back to the first day of high school. Back then I already had many friends. I was known as the paper aeroplane-throwing prankster who smoked cigarettes behind the bleachers. A cliché douchebag, if you will.

Now I was a girl scared stupid. I glided into the swarm of babbling juveniles that blocked the gateway, keeping my eyes firmly fixed on the ground. I tried my best to ignore the occasional stare, glare, and incomprehensible mutter. I suspected some of them saw me for what I truly was – a fraud, a man broken and remoulded into something that defied his very being, but reason told me they were simply curious as to whom I was, and to be honest, so was I.

The bell rang and I looked up for the first time to take in my new prison. It was a grand three-storey house built with centuries-old red brick, a side-gabled roof, and large symmetrical windows on the front façade. It looked like a school that was once posh and dignified a long time ago but had gradually fallen into disrepair as its reputation faded over the decades.

Inside the building, my anxiety didn’t waver, but nobody seemed to care that I was unfamiliar. In fact, nobody seemed to notice me at all. I was invisible and I preferred it that way. At the reception, I was put into the school system and was duly handed my

books, locker key, and timetable. Mother had arranged everything.

And so, I was thrown back into school life just like that.

I took each day like several punches to the gut, dolefully going from class to class, sitting alone, and as far away from people as possible. I kept my head down and tried my best to ignore the occasional inaudible whisper or giggle behind my back.

I knew what teenagers could be like. If you were quiet and unsociable, you left yourself bare and open to scrutiny, which could only heighten insecurities. They did this because I came across as different and painfully shy, I know. But I couldn't help attributing their unyielding finger-pointing to the things I felt incredibly self-conscious about. Namely the permanent, alarmingly girlish mask that I'd never be able to remove. The mask that told a story I wouldn't recall should someone question my past. The mask that was now my very real face.

Always keeping my legs together was a reminder of what I had lost and how I was now expected to present myself for the rest of my life. The bra beneath my blouse felt like battle armour, tightly squeezing the breasts that had quickly become the most significant bane of my new life. The knickers beneath my skirt felt constrictive and always sank into unwanted areas that constantly required me to alter them discreetly. The soft, scented hair that tickled my face, the thick makeup that masked it, all of it felt unpleasant and unnatural.

Nearly every teacher, from Math to French to Chemistry, tried their best to force me out of this self-



built cage, but I quickly shot down every one of the pushy bastards in the hope of being simply left alone. Every day was a true test of my mental endurance.

Mother gifted me with a two-way cellphone – you know, the kind parents give to their little kids to maintain contact in case of an emergency. I called her every day just to hear her voice, which always seemed to ease my countless anxieties.

At lunchtime, I never went to the cafeteria. I preferred to sit in my chosen wash room cubicle, quietly eating my packed lunch, although to be honest, I was rarely hungry. Other times, bullies would enter the bathroom and aggressively bang on the cubicle door, shouting slurs like, ‘loser’ or ‘mute bitch’.

One day the bullies threw wet tissue over the door and nearly ruined my uniform. I despised wearing it anyway, but I hated drawing further attention to myself because I had to spend the rest of the day with tissue caked into my crisp skirt and sweater. From that point on, I sat on the closed toilet seat with my legs kept up so they wouldn’t be able to see from beneath the door.

Removing the bra was my top priority the second I arrived home every evening. I found myself in a snug black turtle-neck and matching leggings, the garb that I not only found to be the comfiest of my new wardrobe, but also the ones I felt least stupid wearing. I tied my hair up into a tight ponytail and then I hit the books hard.

Perhaps it was because of all the painkillers and mind-dampening drugs or maybe I was just plain stupid, but boy did I find learning a struggle. I never absorbed anything in class because, well, my mind

was obviously occupied with other matters. Mother noticed this when I did my homework and thus began rigorously tutoring me until I practically fell asleep at my desk. I wondered why she bothered sending me to school at all. It's ironic, I forgot how forgetful I could be.

By the time dinner came around, I was exhausted. My last task of the evening was reciting everything I did that day in excruciating detail at Mother's request. I told her everything from the routes I took through the school corridors to the messages announced over the intercom.

After that, we would retire to bed, which was by far my favourite part of the day. I took to sleeping in Mother's bed for reasons I cannot quite articulate. I just felt safer with the warmth of her body next to me. I cuddled up to her, resting my hand on her bosom until I drifted away into a dreamless sleep. In those intimate moments, I experienced nothing else in the world but the sound of her heartbeat and her fingers running through my hair.

Mother was always with me, you know.

I'm not just talking about the daily phone calls from my wash room cubicle. Sometimes I felt her standing right behind me with her hands resting on my shoulders. When a teacher asked me a question to see if I was paying attention, when I felt that awful clench of panic when all eyes turned on me, I could hear her whisper inside my head.

"Raise your larynx, just breathe, and enunciate every word as we practised, darling," she would tell me. I'd meekly respond to the teacher, "Sorry Ma'am (or Sir), but I don't understand the question. Could you explain

it to me, please?” before suffering the shameful, disapproving scowl of my frustrated educator. I was never given the answer I needed. Everything was always about being presentable.

Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months, and by the time Christmas came, I was completely indoctrinated into my new routine. I never knew exhaustion like it.

At times I'd leave class to go to the wash room just so I could unload and cry my heart out. I never knew what I was crying about though. In those low moments, I wondered if I had made the right decision when Mother offered me the choice of independence.

I knew these were dangerous thoughts that didn't merit consideration, but whenever they did come to mind, I was sure to tell Mother about them right away. She was the only person I trusted. She also understood me. I personally felt like we bonded whenever I approached her because she was always so grateful and supportive. I would feel relieved after expressing doubts because I was beginning to hate them more than anything else in my life. Even more so than my breasts, or the horrible feeling of reaching down to my penis only to find nothing there.

I had suspicions of Mother relaying these doubts to Dr Ford. When he wasn't poking, prodding, and quizzing me about oestrogen calendars or vaginal dilation cycles, he would be imploring that my general situation was most auspicious, despite me not being direct with any misgivings. Sometimes he mirrored Mother, almost word-for-word in what I believed to be some second-party attempt to reassure me that being a girl forever was great.

I had no quarrel with Mother telling me this because

I trusted her, but hearing it come from the man that gave me a vagina somewhat bothered me. I also loathed how Dr Ford made Mother act when they were together. She would laugh too much, touch him repeatedly, and turn bright red when he touched her back. At times I wondered if our visits to that awful clinic were really for my recovery check-ups or if I was in the middle of some dreaded courtship dance.

### 3.

I pulled the brush through my black balayage hair, pulling out all the bristles until it was softer than silk. Then I brushed it all over again, repeating the process several times, yet feeling no less absorbed in the therapeutic act. If I stopped brushing, would the unclothed girl in the vanity mirror do the same? No, she existed conspicuously like the pink on the demi-cup bra, which held her – or, my breasts into a neat and tidy package.

I wasn't trying to achieve perfection, no; I had turned the process of getting dressed up into one big meticulous distraction. Mother would be home from the parent-teacher meeting soon and I had no idea what to expect. I was trying to evade the grip of fear from consuming me.

Tying my hair up into a high ponytail, I picked up a can of hairspray and sprayed it all over. I slid a doughnut from a few inches down the ponytail, allowing the tips of my hair to poke through before very slowly and carefully tucking them in. I had a long, quiet Christmas break, so to keep my mind occupied, I learned countless methods of styling my hair from the magazines Mother left in my room.

The break was most welcome, as it was the first real

sense of rest and recreation I had in months, but I also worried about my winter exam report more than I'd like to divulge. I was so used to being on the go non-stop that I was scared of being idle. I didn't like to think too much about anything. Thinking stressed me out.

"Oh god," I said, pressing my eyes into the heels of my hands. "What if I've disappointed Mother!" I jumped to my feet and paced around the room for a few minutes until I calmed down.

Looking back in the vanity mirror, I decided I wasn't satisfied with the high doughnut bun, so I re-did the entire process again, and then again for a third time until not a single hair was out of place. I applied more hairspray to ensure my work would be preserved for the night. If my grades were to be poor then my appearance surely wouldn't be.

Slapping some moisturising cream on, I gathered up all of my makeup products from their respective drawers and cabinets and began filling in my eyebrows. I treated each step like a painting, adding light foundation, filling in the dark spots with concealer, and then carefully brushing in some smoky dark eyeshadow and liner.

I never imagined the effort that went into applying makeup until I had to do it myself. I couldn't fathom why girls went to all the trouble. Cursing under my breath, I attached a pair of false butterfly lashes, poking my eye several times until I got it right. Finally, I added rosy blush, running deep scarlet lipstick across my plump lips, flinching with discomfort due to my newly tightened braces.

The rumble of the car pulling into the driveway froze

me like a deer caught in headlights. I dashed to the window, peering through the curtain to observe Mother climbing out of the car. I tried to catch a glimpse of her face so I could get an early judgement of what to expect, but no luck. My bosom started to heave, shoulders tensing, as the front door opened. "Darling, I'm home," Mother bellowed up the stairs. "Are you ready to leave yet?"

Calm washed over me like a cool blanket. She didn't sound in the slightest bit angry. "I'll be down in ten minutes!" I shouted back, turning to my outfit. I stepped into a pair of full sheer tights, adorned with a winding floral pattern of lace that worked its way up my legs. Feeling rather foolish, I did a little hip dance to slide them over my waist.

The skirt I had to wear made me flush with embarrassment. Crafted with crimson velvet fabric, it featured glossy box pleats from the waistband and looked like a garment from the sixties. I was surprised by its weight, as I pulled it high above my waist, noting how it circled when I twisted to and fro.

The next item was a black, long-sleeved crop top and I was sure to stretch the polo-neck when putting my head through. I didn't want to ruin my meticulously crafted hairdo. The top fits like a second skin, but I keenly hated having to expose my belly to the world. The black, suede, high-heeled ankle boots with a silver side-zipper made my legs feel significantly longer with the lofty three-inch heel. Then I inserted a pair of silver hoop earrings into my newly pierced lobes.

And finally, I added the silver, brass chain choker, which exhibited a black velvet bow hanging over the mound of my chest, completing the package like I was some prim, darling prize to be won. It was

consequently humiliating.

Mother was very pleased with the look, insisting that I looked *gorgeous*, an adjective that felt like a violent kick to the withered corpse of my pride. She bought me the outfit for Christmas and was waiting for an excuse for me to wear it. What better occasion than dinner between mother and daughter? She reminded me to bring my purse and helped me into a slim-fitting, black peacoat with front buttons all the way up to my neck.

We ventured out into the cold, January night, frost glistening and crunching like sugar underfoot. I was used to being cold from wearing my school uniform, but the bitterness of the night deeply invaded my bones. While we drove into town, I couldn't stand the anticipation any longer. I had to know how the meeting went. "So, um, how was it?" I asked nervously.

"Good," said Mother, utterly and surprisingly blasé. "Actually, better than good, darling. Your teachers told me that you struggled at first, but that you've since shown signs of progress."

"R-Really?" I said, feeling a tinge of something that I vaguely remembered to be joy. "Is that all they said?"

"Amongst other things, but nothing too pressing to discuss here, although your Math teacher said you need to work a lot harder if you hoped to pass the end-of-year exam."

"Oh."

"Don't worry about it," said Mother, ruffling my thigh. "Don't think I haven't been paying attention to

all the hard work you've put into your first semester."

My body reposed into a state of total relaxation and I dared to let some light into my blackened mind. The purest of relief washed over me, loosening my rigid neck, dropping my shoulders, and easing me into the car seat like an infant in a cot. The urge to cry was there, but I suppressed it, swallowing down that hard lump in my throat because I didn't want to redo my makeup. I couldn't remember the last time I experienced such a joyous feeling of relief. This must be what productivity felt like.

Dinner was an entirely new affair. Perhaps it was due to my lack of history with fancy restaurants, but the manner in which the aged concierge treated me was unlike anything I had encountered before. He seemed to treat Mother and me like princess royals, as he guided us towards our table. I detected an element of flirtation in his small talk, as he constantly found ways to complement our appearances. I found it incredibly off-putting, but at least Mother found amusement in such gushing flatteries.

The table manners I had been taught kicked in like muscle memory. Mother ate duck and I had goat's cheese salad. We ate in comfortable silence, occasionally exchanging a knowing smile or two before slumping into a state of wealth and satisfaction. I couldn't have expected the evening to turn out so positively.

Dabbing her rouge-coated lips with the napkin cloth, Mother sat back and gave me a look comparable to that of an observer of a fine painting. You could almost see the cogs and gears turning in her head, as though she were trying to understand a curious riddle. "You are a very special girl," she said, gently shaking her



head with a proud smile, before adding, "...Ms. Emily Davenport, my adorable daughter."

My mouth twitched, excitement pulsating through my veins, as the corners of my lips turned into a smile. Up until that moment, I never noticed that my new face gave me dimple eyes. *Strange*, I thought, *I don't remember smiling like this before.*

But then, a conflict of doubt and concern arose, and my joy died faster than the wisps of smoke dissipating from the dying candle at our table. Not only did I feel self-conscious of my exposed braces, shielding them from view, as I rubbed my lips together, but also because of my entire being. I was staggered by how quickly my mood changed against my control.

"Darling, are you okay?" said Mother, cradling my cheek in the palm of her hand. She looked very worried. "Do you need to get sick? Will I take you to the ladies' room?"

I closed my eyes and cosied my face into her palm, entwining my fingers with hers, and feeling what I could only describe as pain and joy at the same time.

"You really think I'm special?" I said, realising that I didn't want the praise to end. Commendations ran through me like a stimulating drug.

"Of course I do, sweetheart. Don't you ever doubt that for one second."

I swallowed down the tears hard, desperately seeking further affirmation to put my mind at ease. "Do I deserve to be special?" I said, felinely nuzzling my cheek deeper into her caress.

"Now you listen here," said Mother, jolting me awake, as she sternly retracted her hand. "I'm ordering you to

be happy, missy!”

Feeling utterly destitute, I was stunned and deeply hurt by Mother’s sudden knee-jerk reaction. But there was something in her piercing, all-powerful stare that told me she didn’t intend to be so aggressive. Her sharp eyes softened as an uncontrollable smile spread across her face. She began to snicker, covering her mouth in an attempt to repress it, but to no use. She was joking with me. Her narrow, radiant gaze invited me in on the fun, and then we were both giggling, arms at our sides until the laughter became almost torturous. Her smile was so infectious. I loved seeing her that way.

On the car journey home, Mother spoke about herself for the first time I could remember. “I’m thinking of going back to work soon,” she said, completely out of the blue.

“Oh really?”

“Yes, I think it’s time. This town looks like it could do with another practitioner. And I’ve had my eye on a building up for rent. It’s in the town square and I think it would be a perfect place for practice.”

“That’s great, Mother. I’m happy for you.”

Mother smiled, gently exhaling through her nose, as she pulled into the driveway. “I was thinking that if all went well with the new practice that there could be a job for you there.”

“A job?” I said, confused. “But what about school?”

“Not full-time, darling,” said Mother, bringing the car to halt. “Well, maybe during the summer, but starting

out it would just be Saturdays.”

“Um, what kind of job did you have in mind?”

“Well, every practitioner needs someone out front to take appointments and manage the patients.”

“So, you mean like a secretary?”

“Don’t be foolish, darling, nobody calls people that anymore,” said Mother, switching off the engine. She turned to me, looking like the proud Mother I always wanted. “I had a lovely evening, Ellie.”

“Me too, Mother,” I said, grinning from ear to ear.

#### 4.

Seafront Drive felt deserted, as I walked on unperturbed. The morning sun was rising and a lukewarm sensation had started to spread about the ground like a magic influence, making everything, including my own self, quite content in a dreamy drowsy way.

The little beds of tender grass by the roadside and the dry beach dunes began to look seductive and inviting. I let out a gaping yawn, anticipating another long day of intensive schooling. I stopped for a moment to take off my sweater, as the weight of the backpack was causing me to feel hot and stuffy. As I continued onwards, books clenched to my chest, I almost felt grateful for the air conditioning the pleated school skirt provided. Spring had truly arrived

Approaching the town, my contentment wavered like a candle in the breeze. As I neared the populace, I noticed fellow uniforms from school, and I gradually

lowered my head, apprehension forcing me to peruse my uncomfortable ballet flats. I increased my pace, occasionally looking up to make sure I didn't bump into any passers-by. I rounded the corner on the main street, chest clenching when I saw the gang of school bullies up ahead, smoking cigarettes outside Café Calabria.

Without looking I walked onto the road to cross to the other side. The loud, deafening beep of a car horn jolted me into a quick dash, and I barely made it across the street in one piece. Deeply cringing, heart pounding, trying to get out, I knew the reckless act was about to bring me a lot of unwanted attention.

*Oooh watch out there Ellie!*

*Ellieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!*

*Where are you going, loser?*

*She's very keen to get to the girls' room today!*

Fear travelled through my veins, but I didn't dare show it externally. I walked briskly, trying my best to ignore the mocking jabs and sneering calls. In my periphery, I could see them following me along the opposite side walk, laughing and pointing, doing everything they could to get a reaction from me.

Why couldn't they just leave me alone? I never did anything but keep to myself. I was in the final, long stretch of road that led to the school, and the bullies simply wouldn't quit. Anxiety cackled and sparked like an electrical storm in my brain and my brisk walk escalated into a jog. I firmly clenched the books to my jiggling breasts that shamefully bounced up and down with each hard step against the concrete.

*Where are you running off to?*

*Come on, we just want to see if you're okay!*

*Run, Ellie! Ruuuuuuuun!*  
*Be careful you don't run into a wall now!*

I tripped, books flying into the air, as I stumbled hands-first onto the pavement. Feeling utterly mortified, I staggered to my feet and picked up the shoe that lodged itself in the side walk dent. Thoughts scattered, flesh burning hot, rapid panting, all sense of logic and composure went out the window. Each act of clumsiness was disgracefully topped by another, as I bent over to pick up each book, unwittingly exposing my black sheer lace knickers for all to see.

I refused to look at the cackling hyenas who sounded like they had their fill for the morning as they retreated to their hangout. Feigning composure, I continued up the side walk, soaking in the screeching howls of laughter, as my lower lip intractably quivered. In that instant, I decided that I'd never walk to school again.

It wasn't the best start to the day, but I dutifully motored on from class to class, trying my best to forget the humiliating experience. The result of my winter exams gave me fledgling confidence in academia. I was far from the brightest pupil, but I certainly wasn't the dullest.

When I caught myself comparing my grades to the old life, I was quick to repress it and turn my focus to the present. Mother wouldn't be happy if she knew I was thinking about Brian's past, and if Mother wasn't happy, I wasn't happy. I was desperate to get on the phone with her.

In English class, I looked at the clock every few seconds, anticipating the bell that called for lunchtime. I always made sure that I was the first to jump out of

my seat and dart for the wash room. I did this every day not only to lessen my chances of getting bottle-necked in the crowded corridors but mostly to avoid contact with other pupils, namely the bullies.

Today was no different so when that bell chimed, I was out the door, quicker than ever. I went straight to my wash room cubicle, lifting my legs up, and crossing them on the closed toilet seat into a meditative posture. Deep exhaling, I closed my eyes, and just breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth for several minutes. I tuned out all the noise – toilets flushing, hand dryers whirring, taps running – all of it until everyone left for the cafeteria.

Once everything and everyone was nothing more than a distant nuisance, I opened my eyes, feeling significantly calmer in my own personal sanctuary. I reached into my bag, skipping the lunch box to pick up the phone to call Mother.

Then someone burst into the wash room. Whoever it was, she was certainly distraught, as I could hear muttered cursing and faint sobbing. The cubicle door furthest from my own slammed, as did the toilet seat, creating an unsettlingly loud echo that rattled my nerves.

I remained frozen and listened carefully. Did she know I was here? If she did, would she even care?

I just sat still and hoped she would go away soon, but after a few minutes passed, I concluded that she wasn't going anywhere. After listening to her quietly snuffle for some ten minutes, I could no longer tell if I was irritated or if I felt sympathy. All too often I found myself in the same position. Gathering up what little courage I could muster, I decided that this would be

the moment when Ellie first spoke up.

“Are you okay in there?”

“Mind your own business and go away!”

The heat grew in my cheeks and I was already beating myself up for being so suggestive. “Sorry,” was all I could say in response. I wanted to leave the wash room so I could escape the awkwardness, but the mere thought of being out in the open scared me beyond belief. I was stuck where I was.

“No,” the girl sobbed. “I’m sorry, it’s just – I’m so sick of this awful school!”

“I know how that feels.”

“Please, you couldn’t possibly know how I feel.”

“No,” I said, feeling myself whither and shrink. “No, of course, that was a stupid thing to say. I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologising!”

“S-Sorry,” I said yet again, feeling like my brain was short-circuited.

This was an absolute train wreck. I was so embarrassed by my social incompetence that you could have cooked a three-course meal on my face. I had to get out of there and go to a different wash room. As I unlocked the latch and stepped out, I realised the girl decided to leave at precisely the same moment, which I definitely didn’t intend to happen.

All I noticed before quickly averting my gaze was that she was tall and slender. I washed my hands in the

sink to give the impression that I was simply using the loo and that I wasn't hiding in there. I kept my head down, slowly washing my hands, desperately hoping the girl would leave first so I could return to my cubicle.

I looked into my reflection just as the girl passed behind me, and for a brief moment, she stopped just over my shoulder. She gave me a sort of tight-lipped smile, as though informing me that everything was going to be okay, and then she left.

I didn't stop thinking about the girl for the rest of the day. In Art class, I looked for her amongst the rows of desks, and in Math, I watched each girl enter the class, wondering if she would arrive in tow. I was paying attention to my surroundings for the first time, yet I couldn't see her anywhere.

In the end, I just assumed she was in a different year. Walking home, I thought about her striking visage. Her brown, upturned eyes reminded me of a fierce big cat, her razor-sharp cheekbones and jaw-line, and her brunette hair tied up in a slick ponytail. And of course, that reassuring smile. She looked like a professional ballerina.

While Mother and I dined that evening, I went through the usual process of describing everything I did that day in absolute detail. I chose not to mention my encounter with the bullies that morning. I didn't like hiding things from Mother, but I didn't wish to worry her about things that I probably deserved anyway. "I think I made a friend today," I added, trying to fight back a smile.

"That's wonderful, darling!" said Mother, clearly overjoyed. "What's her name?"



"I – uh – I actually don't know yet," I said, blushing, and feeling incredibly stupid.

Mother lowered her knife and fork, as her bright, cheery face was consumed by the look of pity. I hated that look more than anything, as it did nothing but heighten my shame. Mother sensed my insecurity and continued eating. "Well, I guess you'll have to find out then."

The next day I sat in the same cubicle again and went about my usual routine. A small part of me hoped that the girl would return. I had no idea why I was so fixated on her. It was something to do with that smile – that genuine, heart-wrenching smile that made me feel both stronger and weaker at the same time.

I felt like I knew her a long time ago, perhaps in another life long forgotten or perhaps we had met in this one. She was there like a forgotten word on the tip of my tongue, trying to get out, but just barely forming.

After several days of waiting, I gave up the notion of seeing her again, as I simply wasn't prepared to leave and look for her. This deeply upset me because I really wanted to be confident. I wanted to feel like the girl I was expected to be, but I could never envision a life where I was comfortable in my own skin. The best I could do is fool myself into thinking that I could.

## 5.

Massaging my throbbing temples, I glanced at another flash card. The French words seemed to blur together. Mrs Scott, claiming I needed to catch up, was giving me, no one else, an exam on conjugation the following morning. I was grateful to have two precious hours to

focus on studying rather than attending PE, a class I managed to get out of each week since I started school.

I blinked rapidly and pressed my forehead onto the card, hoping it would imprint on my memory. Groaning, I leaned back in my chair and glanced at the ceiling before forcing my gaze back down to the table. I stifled a yawn and rubbed my bleary eyes, thoughts turning foggy and incoherent.

The library doors opened, loudly echoing throughout the towering chasm of bookcases, immediately alerting me to the figure approaching. It was Ms Dalton, the willowy, beak-nosed PE teacher whose eyes constantly dared you to disagree with her. She was looking directly at me.

*Oh no, I thought, she was going to try and get me to the gym again.*

I jumped to my feet like an attentive soldier, smoothening out my crumpled skirt. As she neared me, her face softened into one of concern and pity. It was the look I recognised in all my teachers whenever they spoke to me. They all knew I was painfully shy. They probably had ideas of me being bullied too, but nothing could be done unless I came forward. No wonder they treated me like a sad case because let's be honest, I definitely was one.

"Are you not coming to PE class this week, Ellie?" Ms Dalton asked in a low, hushed voice.

"I-I've got a French exam tomorrow morning, ma'am," I said, unable to look at her. "I'd like to be prepared for it if you don't mind."

"We've all got other obligations, but that doesn't mean

you should skip PE every single week. You are aware that you're being assessed on this subject throughout the year?"

I was unsure of how to respond, but I was certain of one thing, I really, really didn't want to go to PE. Ms Dalton sighed dejectedly, evidently conscious that she needn't be so hard on me.

"Look all you have to do is show up and you won't fail so come now," she said, showing me the door.

"B-But I don't have any gear!"

"That's no problem, we've got plenty of spare kits. Now go to the dressing room immediately."

Feeling like my rights had been breached, I grabbed my books and stormed out of the library with Ms Dalton on my tail. I was furious. How could running back and forth be considered an academic subject? I abhorred the idea of stripping down in front of my peers until I was practically naked.

Simply existing fully clothed was bad enough, but to show them my contorted body, scars on display, was too unbearable to consider. PE also meant joining a team and being social, which certainly wasn't my forte. Fear consumed my fury. I had a feeling my weekly free classes wouldn't last. The fact that I had gotten this far into the school year without my truancy being addressed was almost miraculous.

In the locker room, Ms Dalton gave me a duffle bag with my new kit inside. "You're lucky," she said with a raised eyebrow. "I didn't think we'd have sneakers for your foot size." She then left me alone to change. There was no turning back now. Why didn't I pretend

to be sick? Why didn't I get Mother to write me a letter of pardon? I reminded myself to control my breathing, as panic rose to greet me like an old, unwanted friend. If I went through with this, it would be the first time I truly integrated with my fellow students. My hands and knees trembling, faltering, as I removed my sweater, and loosened my tie. "It's okay," Mother whispered. "Don't do this for me. Do it for yourself, darling."

A surge of adrenaline ran through my veins and I grabbed the gear bag like a warrior to her weapon prior to battle. Moments later, I emerged from the dressing stall in a pair of purple, capri sports leggings, a matching sports bra, and pure white tennis shoes. I tied my hair back into a tight ponytail and made my way upstairs to the gymnasium.

While the sounds of shoes screeching, balls bouncing, and echoed screams neared, I considered the moment in all its personal importance, and how I truly believed that I wasn't scared. But boy, was I scared when I entered that massive gymnasium.

The court was divided in two with one half playing basketball and the other doing aerobics. The glass windows high above the net displayed an assortment of students on cardio machines. I had no idea where I should go or what I was expected to do. I knew standing there as some nervous idiot would only draw attention to me.

I spotted Ms Dalton circling the aerobics group like a watchful hawk. I walked over to her, timidly holding my hands together, and looking only ahead. When I asked Ms Dalton what I should do, she just impatiently brushed me away, mumbling something about a treadmill upstairs. I didn't waste a second more, as I

had just spotted the bullies entering the gym.

None of the other girls on the row of treadmills batted an eyelid. Feeling glad of this, I stepped up onto the machine and began a slow walking pace. The smell of sweat stung my inner nostrils, increasing the pace to a jog, and marvelling how the sports bra reduced the bouncing on my chest. Huffing and panting, it took but a few minutes for me to feel exhausted, but I kept on going. This actually felt sort of good. My feet pounded the treadmill with all the grace of wet concrete, the springing graceful steps of fifteen minutes earlier had long since disappeared. My rasping throat was as parched as a dead lizard in the sun. My head bobbed from side to side with each footfall, eyes feeling heavier in their sockets.

Then through my periphery, I saw THE GIRL from the bathroom mount the machine next to me. Turning to look at her, my leg twisted, and the speeding, rapid belt below my feet came up to greet my face. I was sent flying backwards, pain darting across my forehead like needles. Girls flocked to my aid, as the belt continued to speed but a hairs width from my crown. As I lay on the floor in a heap, I wondered how many more times I must humiliate myself in public before I became a true hermit.

“Oh no, you’re bleeding,” said the girl, helping me to my feet. “You have to go to the nurse’s room.”

“I’m fine,” I said, feeling a little dazed, but not wanting to cause a fuss. But it was hard when I had several gawping faces staring at me. “I just need to be left alone for a while.” I pushed through the group, holding my hand to the bloodied cut on my forehead. Scuttling downstairs, I made my way through the empty, breezy corridors, not sure of where I was

going, but certain that I craved solitude.

“Hey wait up!” a voice called. I turned around to find the girl chasing after me. She looked vaguely worried. Why, I’m not sure, because we didn’t even know each other. “I’m serious, you need to go to the nurse’s office right now. You could be seriously hurt.”

“It’s only a cut, I’ll manage.”

The girl grabbed me by the wrist, locking my gaze into hers. “You are going right now!” she said with absolute sincerity. I couldn’t refuse her then.

What would Mother think if she found out I consulted a medical professional that wasn’t her? Or Dr Ford, for that matter. As I sat on the bed in the nurse’s office, I had an inkling that she would highly disapprove, which made me uncomfortable. The nurse asked me several questions and did some minor tests to see if I was concussed.

After bandaging me up, the nurse concluded that I was fine, but she wouldn’t rule out a concussion, leaving me to decide on a referral to the emergency room. I refused and used her phone to call Mother to pick me up. When I left the office, the girl was there waiting for me with my backpack and gear bag, ready to be handed over.

*Why was she going to such trouble for me?*

“What did she say?” she asked, leaping to her feet, arms across her chest. “I’ve had concussions before and they’re nasty.”

“I’m fine,” I said, unable to look at her, as I took the bags. I was too shy. “T-Thanks for helping me.”

“Please, it was my pleasure.”

A thick awkward silence hung in the air. The girl had treated me better than anyone else I had encountered in school, yet I couldn’t stand being in her presence for another second. I just wanted to go home. “Well, I b-better get going,” I said, cursing my stammer.

“Thanks again.”

“It’s lunchtime in like ten minutes,” said the girl, in an almost urgent way. “Is there really any point in going back to class?”

“I’m going home. Mother – I mean, my mother is coming to pick me up now.”

“Well at least let me stay with you until she comes.”

“Oh, you really don’t have to do that.”

“Please, as I said before, it’s my pleasure.”

We walked together in silence. I still felt deeply uneasy about the day’s catastrophes. It was going so well until Ms Dalton showed up and ruined everything. I was so red-faced that I didn’t even care for the girl walking next to me. The girl that I became inexplicably fixated on for weeks. The girl that I waited for, hoping and praying that she would return, all because she simply smiled at me. Yet there she was, helping me as though she had known me her entire life. I wondered if there was something mentally wrong with her for wanting to be within two feet of me.

We left the school grounds through the main entrance gates. I was saddened to find that Mother wasn’t waiting for me there. She should have arrived by now.

“I was told that you’ve been in this school since September yet I’ve only seen you once,” said the girl, completely out of the blue. “Why is that?”

I wasn’t sure what to address first. Her unabashed directness or that she just admitted to gathering information about me. “I-I’ve been around,” I said, looking down the road to see if Mother’s car was near, but to my disappointment, nothing.

I simply couldn’t face the girl. She seemed to get the message and backed off, and for a few minutes, we exchanged nothing but a void of foreboding stillness. I was relieved when Mother finally pulled up.

“They bully me too, you know.”

I turned to look at the girl, whose eyes swam with something I recognised to be a deep inner pain. It frightened and unsettled me because she normally looked so strong. It was a wound that identified as my own. With no clue what to say to her at that moment, I simply asked what her name was, but Mother’s sudden appearance next to me cut across her before she could tell me.

“Oh darling, are you okay?” she said, inspecting the bruise on my forehead. “Ooh, you’ve had a bad fall.”

Feeling embarrassed from all corners, I dipped my head, wanting nothing more than to be taken home. We were just leaving when Mother noticed the girl standing there. “Thank you so much for staying with Ellie. You’re a good friend.”

“It’s no problem,” said the girl attentively.

At that moment, I really did feel like a child again by



having such an overbearing mother coddle me in front of my 'friend'. I got into the car and nodded at the girl whose eyes were fixed on me like a hawk. I really wish she wouldn't stare like that. It made me feel deeply uncomfortable.

As Mother started up the engine, she stopped for a beat, cogs visibly churning in her head as she mulled over something that I sensed to be a plan forming against my favour. She leaned over and called the girl over to the window.

*Oh god, I thought, can we just leave already?*

"You should come over to the house for dinner sometime," said Mother.

The girl looked at me to see how I reacted to the sudden offer but I gave nothing away. What on earth was Mother doing getting so involved in my school life?

"I'd like that."

"Wonderful!" Mother beamed. "How does this Friday suit you?"

"Um, this Friday?" said the girl, clearly taken back. She clearly didn't expect the offer to be legitimate. "Let me think..."

"If you would like, of course! I know it's all so sudden, but if you already have plans, we could do it another time."

The girl looked at me once again, her eyes visibly pleading with me to interject, but I needn't dare get in Mother's way when she wanted something. Obviously,

I'd rather not have a stranger over to the house, but I didn't wish to hurt her feelings either. After all, she was very kind to me. A little too much if I may.

"Sure, this Friday sounds good," said the girl, giving up on my response and forcing a friendly smile. "Oh, and my name is Jess by the way."

"Jess?" said Mother. "What a lovely name. I'm Faye. How does seven o'clock suit you?"

"Perfect."

## 6.

I looked at the clock for what was probably the tenth time in the last minute. It was Friday, and Jess, my new "friend", would be arriving at any given moment. The clanging and banging from Mother's busying hands in the kitchen pulled me out from the depths of my thoughts where I spent the preceding days constructing scenarios of the evening ahead.

If Jess didn't show up, I wouldn't be surprised. I avoided her every day since the accident in PE, but not in the manner in which I hid from everyone else – no. Ever since I met her in the girl's room, a big part of me wanted to get to know her better. She was being bullied too, which only furthered my desire to spend time with her. But I was scared. I kept telling myself I would take the step to talk to her, but deep down I knew that would never happen. I never expected Mother to get so involved. I wasn't ready.

My hands wouldn't stop fidgeting as they constantly tugged, readjusted, and swept parts of my clothes. I wore a snug, maroon, cable sweater that made me feel much too hot and stuffy for an indoor meal, especially

with the cream, peter pan collar blouse for an extra layer. The sweater was tucked into a short blue, denim circle skirt held up with a thin light brown belt. My trembling legs were on display, shins garbed with maroon tube socks and feet with a pair of brown clogs.

I was certain Jess wouldn't be dressed like such a nerd but what could I do when Mother dressed me as such? I was afraid she would think of me as some weirdo who liked to collect dolls and knitted blankets with her mother instead of going out with friends. My shining braces didn't help my confidence either.

I stood up, smoothening my skirt, and began pacing back and forth, running my hands through my loose, velvety hair. Just looking at the clock made my breathing rapid and shallow. I could feel my pulse pounding in my temples, my knees ready to buckle any moment. Then the doorbell chimed and all preparations fled my mind like frightened birds, leaving my brain filled with static. All opposition was closing in on me, forcing me to meet their desires rather than considering what I wanted.

Mother was quick to answer the door. "Welcome to our home!" she beamed. "Come in, come in!" I cringed. I wasn't used to seeing her so friendly. It seemed a tad over the top.

Jess rounded the corner and my embarrassment only got worse when I saw what she was wearing. A simple pair of black high-waist jeans, sneakers, and a white t-shirt, a rather tomboyish look compared to my bookish, girly girl attire. In her hand, she held what looked like a box of chocolates.

"Hi Ellie," she said. Her cheeks looked flushed, which I attributed to the chilly evening outside.

“Hi Jess, how are you?” I said. I put out my hand to shake hers. I immediately regretted being so formal and half withdrew it before she took it. She seemed endeared by my awkwardness, which only made me feel all the clumsier.

“I’m great,” she said, taking in the dining room. “Your house is gorgeous.”

“Uh, thanks,” I said, repeatedly tugging at my skirt. “Would you like to sit at the table?”

“Sure.”

It felt like the words we exchanged were between two robots, but I couldn’t help but feel that there were a lot of things being unsaid. I calmed down once we sat. “Perfect timing, Jess. Dinner is just about ready,” said Mother, marching to the kitchen. “I’ll fetch the plates.

“How’s your head?” said Jess, getting comfortable in her seat. “That was a nasty fall the other day.”

“Oh, much better thank you!” I said, brushing it off, as though nothing happened.

“You haven’t been in school all week, I thought something serious had happened to you,” said Jess, an unusual sum of concern in her tone. “I was worried.”

“Oh no, I’m totally fine now,” I said, cheeks searing red hot. I didn’t know where to look or know what to say next. Silence engulfed the room for what felt like an age. “T-Thanks for staying with me again.”

“Like I said,” said Jess. “I wanted to.”

Mother glided into the room, placing two plates of

the most glorious-looking roast in front of us. It was a pity my knotted stomach didn't want any food. "Dinner is served!" she beamed.

"I hope you like spinach, Jess. I know a lot of people don't but I'm told my recipe has the potential to convert non-believers."

"I love it, Faye, thank you!" said Jess, smiling widely.

Mother sat at the top while Jess and I faced each other on either side. The conversation was sparse at first and I could tell this startled Mother so she decided to speak up. "So, Jess, why don't you tell me about yourself?"

Mid-swallow, Jess excused herself by placing her hand over her mouth. "Um, well like most citizens of Hazelbrook I've lived here all of my life," she said, twisting her cutlery through her fingers. She sighed. "And by the looks of things, I'll probably spend the rest of it here too."

She laughed, as though suddenly realising she may have started off her introduction a little too impersonally. "A-Anyway, my Dad is the town mechanic. I'm not sure if you know him, but he's got a shop down Booth Alley. Brookers Tyres?"

"You must forgive me, but my daughter and I are still newcomers to this town. You can rest assured next time I need a car service I shall call your father."

Jess smiled, rather half-heartedly. I detected a hint of disdain for the small talk. "That would be grand," she said, forcing a smile. "And may I ask, what it is you do, Faye?"

"I'm a GP," said Faye, as a matter-of-factly. "Well,

I'm not practising at the moment, but I hope to be back to it soon. I'm currently looking at an office down town."

"Well should my father get into another bar fight I'll be sure to take him to you!" said Jess.

The air suddenly became thick with tension. Mother clearly had no response so she just smiled and turned her attention back to eating. I couldn't bare the clinking and scraping of cutlery for another second.

"What kind of things are you interested in, Jess?" I said, words blurting out of my mouth.

Mother looked at me, vaguely bewildered, for she was under the impression that Jess and I knew each other. I gazed into Jess's eyes for what felt like the first time all over again. Curiously, I could feel a rush of excitement pulsate through my veins like pure adrenaline. I had been denying it for some time. Was I hot for this girl?

"I love to dance," said Jess. She rested her chin on my hand, eyes fixed on me for just a brief moment, shortening my breath. "Ballet in particular. I love ballet more than life. It's what I want to pursue if I'm lucky enough to leave this town."

"Ballet?" said Mother. She was impressed, eyes widening. "You didn't tell me you had a ballerina for a friend, Ellie."

I shrugged, not knowing exactly how I was expected to respond.

"With all due respect, Faye, your daughter and I don't know each other very well."

I was alarmed by Jess's unexpected honesty. Was this really happening? Mother was looking at me with a stupid, puzzled look on her face, waiting for me to say something. A tinge of rage towards Mother pricked me and I quickly swallowed down, hard.

"But that's why I'm here," said Jess. She touched her foot against mine from underneath the table. I felt like my heart was about to burst through my chest. "To get to know her better."

I simply smiled and pretended to turn my attention back to the meal. The brief rush I experienced was fading and I soon returned to being the feeble, quivering bag of nerves I was mere moments ago.

This was all wrong. Jess shouldn't be here. For the remainder of the dinner, I stayed quiet, hoping and praying for the uncomfortable meal to wrap up soon. Small chat consumed the dinner table and I retreated into myself, trying to figure out Jess's inexplicable interest in me. I disregarded the look she gave me, that deep, sensual stare that made me feel undeniably inflamed. However, it was there, lingering at the back of my mind, urging me to take action against the butterflies in my stomach. I really was hot for this girl

*Oh god, if Mother discovers this!*

Jess insisted on washing the dishes once we were done but Mother wouldn't have any of it. She cleared the table and brought everything into the kitchen in two trips. For a moment, I was alone with Jess and typically I had no clue what to say. This girl was going to get me into huge trouble.

"Do you even want me here?" she said, leaning in with a whisper. "You've barely opened your mouth."

“N-No, I – I mean, yes!” I said urgently. My cheeks burned once again. “Sorry, I’m – I’m just not the best at talking.”

“You should relax, Ellie,” said Jess, leaning back to cross her arms. “It’s your home, not mine.”

“Of c-course, s-sorry!”

She smiled, not in a mocking way, no, but in a sort of admiration of my bumbling nature, like I was something delicate and innocent to be looked after. She seemed to enjoy riling me up. I smiled back, exhaling deeply in a last-ditch attempt to relax my tensing shoulders.

I could hear Mother talking on the phone in the kitchen. Who on earth would be calling her? She returned with a look of regret on her face, and I knew right away that she had to go somewhere. Of all times she had to leave.

“Girls I’m so sorry, but that was my real estate agent and he needs to speak with me in person downtown,” said Mother. She was holding back excitement. “I think we may have closed a deal!”

“Oh, don’t worry about it, Faye,” said Jess, standing attentively. “I need to be going now anyway.”

“Nonsense!” said Mother, waving Jess off with a courteous grin. “It’s Friday night and you girls have had a long week of schooling. I’m sure Ellie would like to fix you a cup of tea.”

Jess looked at me for consent, but I could only stare, dumbfounded. “If you’d like, I’d happily fix you some tea,” I said, snapping out of my trance. Everything



was happening so fast.

“Sure,” said Jess. She grinned in an almost comical manner. “I’d like some tea.”

“I shouldn’t be too long,” said Mother, as she wrapped her coat around her. “I’ll show you to the living room if you’ll follow me, Jess.”

I quickly jumped to my feet. “I’ll make the tea,” I mumbled, breaking into a dash for the kitchen. I couldn’t believe this was happening. I’m by no means spiritual but it felt as though something more powerful than all of us was pushing Jess and me together.

Filling the kettle with water, my heart pounded against my ribs. I couldn’t believe Mother just left me alone. I wasn’t used to having guests. I took the teapot down from the cupboard, two cups and two saucers while the rumble of the kettle pulled me into a rather hypnotic state of mind. Hand trembling, I used the other to restrain it, closing my eyes into a meditative trance. What could I do to get out of this? I could say I feel unwell. Yes, that will do! I’ll tell her my head feels sore again.

“Your Mom is really nice, Ellie,” said Jess, from the sitting room.

“T-Thanks,” I said. I broke free of my trance and tried to compose myself. “Do you take sugar with your tea?”

“Sure do!”

The kettle was ready and I filled the pot with two teabags before placing them on a tray with little pots of milk and sugar. I felt ludicrous walking into the

sitting room, like some old-fashioned tea lady in need of catching up with the times. What teenager sits around drinking tea these days?

"I thought I'd see more photos hanging up," said Jess, seating herself on the couch. She poured me a cup and then fixed her own. "Your Mom seems to be the kind of woman who treasures her children."

How observant of her. "She does have pictures," I said. I was becoming a remarkable liar. "We haven't been living here long. I'm sure she'll hang them up."

Jess took the first sip, closing her eyes in pure bliss as she swallowed. "Mmm, that is seriously a damn fine cup of tea!" she cooed. "That's beautiful, Ellie."

I'm not sure why, but I felt like laughing. I didn't expect Jess to react that way to something so simple as a cup of tea. Curiously, I started to feel a little more relaxed. Perhaps Mother leaving was all that I needed to happen for my confidence to gain momentum. "I'm sorry for being so withdrawn this evening," I said. The desire to look at her returned so I did. "I'm really bad at talking to people."

"You and me both," said Jess, smiling half-heartedly.

"Somehow I doubt that."

"What do you mean?"

"I find it hard to believe there are others out there like me," I said, a little surprised by how forthright I was being. "At least you haven't spent the last several months living in a toilet."

"That's why I'm here," said Jess, touching my arm.

“I’m here to help you.”

“I – uh –,” I said, utterly lost for words. I wanted to tell her I felt ill, but I couldn’t do that to her.

We both gazed into each other’s eyes in an odd way, as if it were a silent argument. All my life I couldn’t hold eye contact with anyone for more than a couple of seconds, but here I was, unable to break free from this unbearably tense moment. It felt like a continuation of when we first met in the bathroom.

Unpalpable. Intoxicating. Was this really happening? Jess’s sharp features seemed to soften, as though a barrier had dissolved between us. No sooner without any authority, she leaned in, dragging me deeper into her eyes, squeezing every breath from my lungs. It really was happening. My hands started trembling uncontrollably. Jess took them into hers and they stopped immediately.

“I – I’ve never done this,” I said. My chest heaved like a balloon, in and out, in and out.

“I knew you were like me,” she said, closing her eyes.

Her lips brushed mine. Not innocently, but like a tease, fiery yet demanding. I wanted to pull away before I lost myself but I couldn’t do it. My senses were utterly seduced and I could no longer think straight. “Ellie,” she whispered slowly, prolonging each letter as if to savour them.

I smiled, lower lip trembling, heart fluttering, as she sensually pressed her warm, soft lips against mine. A strange, sensual spark ignited inside my crotch that made me feel utterly primal. It was an entirely new sensation completely alien to my senses. It spread

from the ends of my fingers to the tips of my toes like electricity.

Jess cupped my face into her hands, kissing me deeper and harder, biting my lower lip in between short, passionate breaths. I was terribly weakened by her gentle, seductive touch, as she pressed her thin, lean body against mine, pausing for a beat to stare longingly into my eyes.

Then I felt her hot breath against my neck, then the tender brush of lips. I was only weakened further and I gasped, feeling my nipples harden against the soft fabric of my bra. There was no going back now. I couldn't stop myself from this.

Her hand ran through my hair as the kisses became increasingly urgent. Another hand around my hip, gradually moved upwards, slithering underneath my sweater and blouse while she gave further attention to my lips with her tongue. Her hand burrowed its way towards the clasps on my bra, and I arched upwards, permitting her to open them. I was no longer the quivering, nervous mess of moments past – no, I was a raging fire.

Breasts spilling out, free of constraint, she moved her hand to my left breast and started circling her finger around my erect nipple while she kissed me deeper and harder with her tongue. I knew what we were doing was wrong, but I desperately didn't want it to end. She gently squeezed my nipple, sending ecstatic, almost tortuous shivers down my spine while our tongues danced with one another. A strange warmth gathered inside my knickers and it made me feel incredibly ashamed, but all the more awakened.

Jess withdrew her hand from my breast, sliding it

down over my stomach, over my thigh, and then teasingly up my skirt.

I opened my eyes and she looked at me, as though asking permission. Again, I was terribly afraid, but if it meant not ending this wonderful, blissful feeling, then yes, I nodded before closing my eyes again. The excitement I felt was too much. I could feel her fingers slowly making their journey to my crotch.

I had no idea what to expect, but as she circled her fingers around my centre, back and forth, up and down, I was taken to another planet. She returned to nibbling my neck, massaging my soaked vagina up and down until I released the shameful, blissful moan that was trapped in my throat.

And then that's when I saw *her*.

Jess heaved herself to meet my eyes again, except she wasn't quite the same person. The bliss I felt was violently torn out of me as I met the eyes of a girl long dead. Confused and petrified, I immediately diverted my gaze as you would in a nightmare. I could see Mother. She was in the corner of the room, watching me, screaming at the top of her lungs, but not a sound was leaving her gaping, wide-open mouth.

Pure, unadulterated terror stabbed me repeatedly, sobs spewing out of my throat like an engine fire. Feral instinct powered my contracting muscles. I violently pushed Jess off me and she thumped her head against the coffee table. I scrambled across the floor, tripping over the wet, crumpled knickers around my ankles. I quickly pulled them up, too frightened to look at the horrors behind me.

For a moment, she had become Jess, the girl I killed.

“What the hell are you doing!” said Jess. She was shouting. “You really hurt me, Ellie!”

“You should leave!” I cried. “Get out of this house now!”

I rounded the corner into the hallway, placing my hand against the wall for support, as my knees nearly buckled with terror. The world was spinning out of control. I turned around, slowly backing towards the kitchen, dread consuming all rational thought. “Just fucking leave now!” I roared in a deep, masculine voice I thought to be long repressed. I felt sick. Was this what one felt before dying? Was this the feeling of seeing a ghost? “Get out of my house!”

The world suddenly felt unnaturally clear, like I had spent years living in a dream and now I had returned to the endlessly nightmarish existence where I belonged. I choked under the sobs, as I watched the empty hallway, dreading to see the strange face of the girl who made me feel the purest of ecstasy mere seconds ago, but now she petrified me beyond description. A heavy, charged feeling of anxiety hung in the air. I could feel Mother watching me through the walls, screaming with fiery rage.

*I shouldn't have let Jess do that to me. I shouldn't have gone along with it. I'm sorry Mother! I'm sorry! Please, please don't do anything to me!*

Jess coyly slipped out of the living room. She quietly took her coat, slowly putting it on, as though prolonging her hope in me to explain myself before she left. She opened the front door, standing in the frame for a moment, considering her words. Then she turned around, eyes blurred behind tears. “I misread the situation,” she said. She didn’t seem angry at all.

"I'm so sorry." And then she left.

The second the door closed I picked myself up from the floor and slowly edged towards the sitting room.

"Mother?" I called out, but there was no response. I was certain she was there because I could feel her presence, but as I rounded the corner, I saw nothing but a silent, empty living room that hosted the chaos minutes prior. "Mother!" I bellowed, panic seeping in. "Where are you?!"

An icy chill came over me, blackness closing in my periphery, head swelling with waves of nausea. I was definitely going to get sick. I dashed up the stairs, hand covering my mouth. I wretched and heaved, abdominal muscles folding in on themselves. My ears were ringing. I couldn't shake the image of Jess's face – her blue streaked black hair, her lip piercing, her cold dead eyes.

And of course, Mother's demonic face screamed betrayal. Remnants of blissful pleasure continued to tickle and caress my skin, shaming me into confronting my vision of heated foreplay with the girl I killed. Disgusted with myself, I dreaded a lifetime of remembering such a depraved thought, knowing deep down that it would forever be seared in my brain. I threw up into the toilet.

"Oh god," I cried. I pressed the heels of my hands into my temples, as though attempting to squeeze the horrors out of my brain. Was I losing my grip on reality? All I wanted was my mother's comfort. "I'm so sorry Jess! Please, please just go away!"

I sat on the toilet floor, waiting for Mother to come back, crying my heart out. I never imagined anything

more atrocious than sleeping with the girl I killed, yet it happened all the same. I relived each detail of the horrible instant, replaying it in the album of my memory. Each time made it feel more real, like the long-deceased Jess was actually on top of me, pleasuring me. It burned like a hot iron, forcing me to confront the fact that I had long stopped thinking about her. How could I have possibly shed the guilt? How did I not notice the singular moment when she left me?

*Jessica Campbell was unanimously liked by everyone she encountered in her promising albeit tragically shortened life. She excelled in the classroom, winning student of the year for three successive school years. She was captain of the school volleyball, chess, and debate teams, leading each to many victories on a national scale. She radiated kindness and understanding, as she campaigned for young people's mental health through several charitable organisations. For the last three Christmases of her life, she volunteered in soup kitchens that kept the homeless fed and watered. A couple of months before she died, she raised over ten thousand dollars for her brother who was in need of special care to accommodate his recovery from a severe brain tumour. Your honour, members of the jury, these are but a few attributes of a young woman who was exceptionally loyal to her friends, family, colleagues, and fellow students. A young woman who was denied the best years of her life by someone without any regard for what we hold most dear to our hearts. A hopeful future. That is what Brian Philips took away when he gave Jessica the poison that irreparably shattered the lives of all those who loved her.*

I was in a twilight state of mind when Mother found me, not quite unconscious, but certainly awake. "What on earth has happened, Ellie!" she said, bags dropped on the floor. The fear and panic in her voice radiated warmth and concern. She joined me on the floor and



gathered me into her bosom, rocking me back and forth. All of my anxieties washed away, softening me into a pool of warm tears, as I sobbed into her chest. She was my very real mother and not a figment of imagination. "Darling, what's happened?"

"I'm sorry," was all I could squeak. I had no intention of lying to her. "I did something very bad."

The brief pause in her rocking motion worried me for a second, but when she resumed, stroking my hair through her fingers, I was safe. I trusted her with all my heart. Lifting my head off her chest, I met her powerful gaze and turned my head to reveal the mark Jess had left on my neck.

"What's this -," said Mother. She swept some strands of hair out of the way to examine the hickey. The intense, foreboding silence crushed me and I was terrified of what was about to happen. "Did Jess do this?"

Mother blurred as I nodded. I wiped the tears away and sniffled the sobs back in my aching throat. "She kissed me," I said. I was struggling to hold onto my composure. "I kissed her back. Then she - I mean, I didn't stop her from touching me. I couldn't stop her. I wanted to. Please, please forgive me, Mother!"

For a moment it seemed like she was about to strike me. A part of me wanted her to because I was deserving of it. Her eyes told me she wanted to do it, but she refrained. If anything, she seemed icily calm. She picked herself up from the floor, towering over me like the deity that she was, forever in charge of my destiny. "Did you enjoy it?" she said coldly.

"Yes," I said. I got up onto my knees, submissively

holding onto her thighs, as I gazed up at her, pleading with all my heart. I could still feel Jess's touch.

"That's why I'm telling you," I said, voice cracking.

"I really didn't want to enjoy it. I want you to make it stop!"

Mother threw my hands away and backed off a step. The eyes that were filled with love just moments ago were now tainted with hate and bitterness. She quietly turned away and left me alone on my knees to contemplate my actions.

There was nothing I could do. I had betrayed her vision for me. I had nothing left but the desire to gain her trust again. No matter the cost. "I'm sorry, Mother!" I cried. The weight of my troubles became too much to carry and I fell in a heap onto the floor, uncertain of where my life was going next.

## 7.

The entire weekend went by without Mother speaking to me. When Monday morning came around, I received no waking call for school. Truly it was the last place I wanted to be but I did my duty, put on my uniform, and made my way out the door. The foggy morning snapped at my bare legs, making me shudder all over with the cold. The sun was set to swelter that afternoon and I felt noticeably more anxious than usual. I desperately hoped I wouldn't bump into Jess at school.

While I walked, I thought hard about my situation. The truth was that I just didn't know what the hell I was doing anymore. I was paralysed that if I take a step in any direction, I was going to experience terrible pain. I was only ever sure of my trust in Mother, but now I fear I lost it because I was tempted by lustful feelings

towards another girl.

It was clear I was supposed to be a very – what shall we say – *traditional* class of female and I spoiled that by dipping my toe into the forbidden waters. I was a child who had just discovered the consequences of putting my hand in the fire.

The pain from the result was so terrible, I knew I'd never make the same mistake again. My unyielding devotion to pleasing Mother served as my salvation, as well as a constant reminder that I was far from the perfect daughter. What else am I to do but devote everything I've got to seek her forgiveness? I was on the road to happiness before the past unexpectedly burrowed its way back into my life to ruin everything.

An approaching car from behind me caught my attention due to its oncoming speed. I stepped out of the way by standing in the ditch. It took me a moment to register that the car was Mother's, and judging by her speed, she was very angry. Jamming the brakes, the car lunged forward as it came to a halt right in front of me. Goose flesh spread over my arms, fear shooting up my spine like an electrical surge, freezing me into a state of awe. Silent, almost robotic, Mother got out of the car and grabbed me by the arm, pulling me inside. I didn't protest. If anything, I helped her take me away.

I was in big trouble. Mother drove with such veracity and purpose. I knew all too well not to open my mouth and just accept whatever tirade was about to come down on me. As she swerved into the driveway, tyres skidding gravel onto the lawn, I started to feel scared. She pulled me out of the passenger seat, head averted, firmly gripping my forearm like I was hanging from a cliff edge. It hurt like hell, but at least she was

touching me. At least she knew I was there.

Mother threw me inside the house, slamming the front door before pulling me up the stairs. Inside the bathroom, she picked up a bottle of makeup remover. Now she was looking directly at me and I could see the extent of the mania in her eyes that burned like wildfire.

“Is this what you are then?” she said, saliva seething from her mouth. She dumped the bottle into a cloth and aggressively dabbed it into my face. “Come on then, say it! You never were a girl, were you?!”

Instinct forced me to defend myself, albeit meekly, by cowering behind trembling hands, but that only made Mother angrier. She pushed me against the sink, wrapping my hair around her fist, as she crudely struck the makeup from my face, clumsily dabbing, rubbing, and wiping hard into my skin. The smelly liquid stung my mouth and eyes. Gagging and spluttering in a whirlwind of punishment, I tried to say something, but I couldn’t think of the right words amongst all the chaos.

“You want to be a boy again?” Mother spat. Holding me against the wall by the hair with one hand, the other scrambled for an unseen object inside the mirror cabinet. “Well, Brian, by all means!”

A sharp, stabbing pain engulfed my chest at the mention of that name. I refused to confront it and I hoped she wouldn’t use it again. For a moment, I thought I really had been stabbed, as a pair of scissors was brought into my line of sight, but no blood. She was cutting my hair. *No, no, stop!* I was released from her grip in a devastating shock, patting my head to find streaks of my long hair missing.

Mother grabbed me by the collar and tore my blouse open. Grabbing me between bra cups, she pulled me out of the bathroom and back down the stairs. A well of tears creaked inside my throat, as warm tears of hurt gathered in my eyes, stinging them. I was dragged into the sitting room, stumbling like a clumsy animal Mother turned to me once again. "Boys don't wear bras, do they, Brian?" she said.

She reached out, scissors in hand, and cut my bra in two before throwing the scissors onto the couch. My hands darted to rescue my breasts from spilling out into plain sight, but they were stopped midway by the agile might of Mother's grip. "Since you wish to be a boy again, we'll have to get these removed!"

Mother pulled me over to the couch. She sat down, back straight, eyes ablaze, and threw me over her lap. There was no way I could have prepared for what happened next. She pulled up my pleated skirt and smacked me hard on the cheek.

*This couldn't be happening, I thought, no way could this be happening!* She smacked me again, and then again once more. On and on she went, increasing in intensity, doubling down on the strength, shattering my rear with unrelenting force until the stings of pain made me yelp like the quivering little girl I was.

*Smack, smack, smack!*

Now I certainly was crying. Not because of the humiliation – god no, my dignity and pride had long since vanished with the man I remembered to be Brian.

Tears spilt out of my eyes with each painful spank that drove home the horrible possibility that my

relationship with Mother was unsavable. I had ruined it for good. She pulled my knickers up, twisting them deep into both my genitals and rear.

“You feel that, Brian?” said Mother, cotton sinking deeper into my vagina. “Do you feel your old friends down there, do you?” She pulled harder than ever, which made my legs spastically kick to and fro in pure discomfort and pain.

I wanted it to stop, but she continued to spank and wedge me to the point of unresponsiveness. When she was done with me, she pushed me to the floor, like I meant absolutely nothing to her. The sheer cruelty of it all made me blubber and sob inside a pool of my own shame and misery. I couldn’t even look at her while I cried into my arms folded on the hardwood nor could I conjure up the right words to say. I deserved all of this, and a lot more.

I imagined Mother was in the process of composing herself, as she stood up. Please, please just say something to me, I thought, I can’t bare another second of living with the guilt.

“Brian,” said Mother icily. “Look at me.”

That piercing stab again, I thought, wincing in pain. A large part of me told me not to respond to the name because it would mean acknowledging who I once was. “You know that’s not my name anymore,” I said, focusing my gaze on the corner leg of the couch. “Please don’t call me that.”

“I’ll call you whatever I want to call you!” Mother spat. “Now stop this nonsense and look at me.”

Was this the part where I’m forgiven? I thought.

I gathered myself onto my knees, feeling like a blubbering, mewling quim, joining my hands together in a stance that resembled a worshipper praying to her deity. As I looked up at my god, I thought for a moment how beautiful she looked when stern.

“Do you recall what I said the last time you took it upon yourself to defy me?” said Mother, glaring with an intensity that told me she wasn’t kidding around. “I said I would cast you out and let the hoodlums have their way with you.”

“I’m –”

“Don’t say another word!” Mother snapped, raising her hand to silence me. “You don’t get to say anything to me anymore. Your actions have spoken louder than your words. Your time in this house is done. Your time as my daughter is *DONE*. Now get out.”

This couldn’t be happening, I thought, panic settling in like an old unwanted friend. “Please, Mother, don’t do this to me,” I said, desperation forcing me to plead like a slave. “I’ll be a good girl from now on. I swear. I’ll – I’ll get a boyfriend. I’ll prove to you that I don’t like girls anymore!”

Mother grabbed me by the scruff of my hair and pulled me towards the door. My worst nightmare was becoming a reality and it was closing in on me like crashing waves from all sides, drowning me. I was pushed outside the front door, dressed only in my torn blouse, pleated skirt, socks, and mary janes. I tumbled onto the porch, hands rescuing my face from meeting the concrete. I turned to face my Mother, hoping I’d get one last chance to prove myself.

“I wish you the very best, Brian,” said Mother. Her

stern, rigid features softened, and for a moment, she really meant it. “I really do. Goodbye.”

And just like that, Mother closed the door on me. The finality of the lock clicking, followed by the cold silence against the crashing waves behind me made my thoughts accelerate beyond my control. My breathing became rapid, shallower.

In these moments before my personal hurricane, I understood the drug addict, and the alcoholic – the struggle to stop the primal surge to obtain their vice. I’m knocking on the door, then banging with what little strength I have in my arms. No answer. I walloped, kicked, and shouldered the door, heart racing faster, faster, faster while thoughts like, ‘Where am I supposed to go?’ and ‘I’m sorry!’ spewed out of my lips. Again – no answer. Again – no answer. No Mother.

Eventually, after some time, I stopped panicking, as the reality of my situation sunk in. Sitting on the porch step, I stared ahead at the vast, seemingly never-ending sea. There was no way she really meant any of this, I thought, she wouldn’t really do this to me. There was no conceivable reality where she would kick me out without money, without a change of clothes, without a safe place to go. So confident was I in Mother’s love for me that I convinced myself into a state of calm. I’ve been down this road before. I was certain I could get back into her good graces so long as I remained patient and repented for my sins.

The wind had become the orchestral conductor of the sea, sending waves into their crescendos’ all to the ballad that was morning light. I was drawn to the perfume of salty water and the fine spray that came as boldly as any viola flurry.



I crossed the road and walked onto the beach. Funny, I thought, I've lived by the beach for nearly a year and this was the first time I walked on it. The sand was the gentlest hue of gold, almost earthen and muted, the humble star of the scene.

I sat down and waited. Thankfully, warmth filled the air and rubbed against my exposed skin like a soft blanket. My thoughts quickly turned back to my situation. How could I have messed up so badly, I thought, things were going so well and I just had to tell Mother that I was with a girl, didn't I?

The regret quickly passed, and I suddenly became aware that I was thinking dangerously once again. I had to tell her. I believed the truth was the best because I didn't want to hide anything from her. I just didn't expect her to kick me out. Wet hot tears filled my eyes, my throat closing in tight, and each regretful thought pitched higher than the last in an effort to squeak out the words bottled up inside me.

I wanted my Mother back.

## 8.

It was much colder. I was shivering. Arms wrapped around my sides; my legs trembled under the icy chill of the sea breeze. Cool water lapped at my feet, fizzing and bubbling like brine. Waves ahead roar and roll down, crashing onto the shore with a soft hiss; peeling away at the deep bronze sand beneath my feet.

The sun was sinking below the horizon and the first stars in the sky were visible. Ten hours had passed, the tide was closing in, and I was running out of time. Many times, throughout the day, I tried to get Mother to come outside, but no response. It was like nobody

lived there. Doubt crept in with the darkening sky and I was beginning to feel like I truly was homeless.

I decided it would best to keep moving, despite my misgivings about venturing away from the house, but I had to stay warm. A couple of blouse buttons torn, I struggled not only to keep the chill from rattling my bones but also to refrain my breasts from exposure. I cursed my decision to wear knee socks that morning rather than tights, as I trudged along the beachside, skirt dancing in the wind.

I splashed my face with water to remove the smudged makeup. I then used one of the hair ties on my wrist to do my jagged hair up into a ponytail in case I met someone who asked too many questions.

I walked and I walked until I saw the glow of the town. I didn't want to go near the place for fear of someone seeing me. However, I knew I was more likely to find a place of warmth there. If someone saw me, my hagged appearance would surely arouse suspicion so I made the decision that I'd only wander down streets that were empty or poorly lit. I had no idea where I was going. Eyes darting in every conceivable direction, arms rubbing each other, I sought only protection from the sharp sea winds.

Then, to my utter panic, two fellow school students rounded the corner at the end of the street. I didn't know their faces but the immediate sight of their uniforms was enough for me to get out of there immediately. Their stride took them directly towards me and I took the next turn available before they could notice me.

My heart was pounding so hard, I feared another panic attack, but I remained calm. I ventured into a park,

sheltered by an abundance of trees, which stood stark and black against the creeping moonlight. I sat on a bench underneath a broken street light and watched the gate entrance until the two students wandered past. I exhaled, unloading another dump of anxieties into the air.

Alone once again, but I still felt incredibly unsafe. Is this what most girls felt when alone out in the dark? The duck pond in front of the bench gave me pause to reflect. It was uncannily still and blacker than ink. An unusual sense of calm washed over me and I relaxed on the bench, trying everything in my power to ignore the cold, but failing. It was nowhere near as bad as the beach though.

I reeled through my options for what was probably the thousandth time that day. I wondered if Mother was observing my location via my tracking implants. I really hoped she was because if not then that meant she really had given up on me becoming her daughter.

What could I do to get her attention back? If I waited outside the police station, would she see where I was on the tracking device and drive over in a panic? No, that was a terrible idea. I'd have to convince her that it was a ploy to get her attention. It would only add to the betrayal. Then I thought about walking into the sea, but what if she didn't come? What if a wave came crashing down on me and pulled me out to sea? The idea was alluring to consider.

The weight of the world was weighing me down and I felt oh so tired. I didn't sleep much since Friday after the dinner date. I observed my surroundings once again, thinking, this town is safe, right?

Shrouded in the darkest area of the park, the place

told me it was rarely occupied due to the unkempt landscape and rusty old gates. There weren't any homeless in Hazlebrook so I figured it would be safe to lie down. I didn't want to sleep, just rest, for I probably needed it just as much as I needed my mother. I lay on my side, pulling my skirt down to cover my knickers from view, eyes closing.

Through the darkness, a voice called out to me, gently rocking my shoulder. "Young lady, what are you doing out here all by yourself?"

For a second, I thought I was dreaming, but reality quickly pulled me back into the waking world. I quickly sat up to see who the mystery voice belonged to. I was stunned to find a police officer standing right there before me. Words caught in my throat, I could only stare in awe and fear.

"Are you okay?" the police officer asked. She moved in closer, hand outstretched like she was approaching a wild creature. "It's a cold night out, why don't I take you someplace warm."

I could only stare – the hat, the badge, the baton – all of it made me freeze in pure terror like I had developed a wild defence mechanism. I really should say something before I courted suspicions.

"It's not safe being out here for a girl of your age," said the officer. "I know you're scared so why don't you start by telling me your name."

As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I could see that the officer had a kind face and she was no threat to me, unless I divulged information as to why I was sleeping alone on a park bench. "E-Ellie," I squeaked. I cleared my throat. "My name is Ellie Davenport."

“Okay, Ellie, you wouldn’t mind telling me where you live?”

Fear was taking over, short-circuiting my brain into a state of unresponsiveness. I heard what she said but I simply couldn’t register it. *Come on, Ellie, I thought, get a grip!*

“Um, Seafront Drive up by the sand dunes,” I said, relieved to break free of my chains, if for only a second.

“I know the place, why don’t you come with me and I’ll take you home,” said the officer, gesturing towards the park exit.

“N-No thanks, I was just on my way there,” I said, feeling disorientated. I stood up; my wobbling bare legs were just about able to support me. “Thanks for w-waking me up. I didn’t mean to fall asleep. S-Sorry.”

I turned to walk away, hoping I’d be left alone, but knowing deep down I wasn’t out of the woods yet.

“Hang on, I can’t allow you to be out here at night. I’m sure you’re aware that there’s a ten o’clock curfew for students of the academy so I’m obliged to take you home right away.”

Walls closing in from every direction, I could only do as I was told. “Oh, I d-didn’t know that,” I said. “S-Sorry, officer.”

“It’s no problem, Ellie. Now if you will follow me,” said the officer, smiling warmly.

I apprehensively followed the officer to her squad car,

which was parked just down the street. As I neared that shining blue vehicle, I couldn't help but recall the time when I was arrested all those years ago.

I climbed into the back, sitting right behind the officer's seat while she grabbed a blanket from the trunk. She wrapped it around me, making me feel all the safer. As she pulled out onto the road, heating up to the max, panic struck again. How could I protect Mother from finding out about this?

"So, I have to ask, why were you sleeping in that old park? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"I – um, I ran away from home," I said, thinking on the fly.

"I guessed as much," said the officer, glancing at me with a knowing look in the rear-view mirror. "How long were you gone? We didn't receive any missing person report from your parents down at the station."

"I – I – not that long," I said. I was losing my grip on my lies. I sensed a hint of suspicion in the officer's tone, or perhaps I was being paranoid. "I mean, like an hour or two I – I think."

"Uh-huh," the officer nodded. For some time, she didn't say anything and just stared ahead at the road without looking back at me. Then came the question I didn't want to hear. "Is everything at home okay, Ellie?"

"W-What do you mean?" I said, stalling so I could think of an appropriate response.

The officer paused for a moment to carefully consider her words. "I've been based in this town for two years

now, Ellie,” said the officer, sighing. “You’re the first runaway school girl I’ve come across, lying alone in the dark of night with no warm clothes on. So, I have to ask if there was something or someone you were running from?”

“I had a fight with my Mother,” I said, speaking from the heart. I was terribly afraid and still unsure of how I was going to escape the box the officer put me in. “A r-really bad one.”

“I see,” said the officer. She sounded like she was relating to me. “Do these fights occur often?”

“Lately, yes,” I said, throat swelling with incoming tears. Fight it, Ellie, I thought, fight it! It was no use. The tears burst forth like water from a dam, spilling down my face. The muscles of my chin tremble like a small child and I look toward the window as if the moonlight on the sea could soothe me. “I – I’m a really lousy daughter!”

“Hey, it’s going to be okay!” said the officer. “I know it’s a rough time in your young life, but it will get better, I promise you that. And I’m sure your parents love you very much.”

“You don’t know that,” I sobbed, rubbing my nose with my hand. “Mother does everything she can to give me the best life possible and all I do is screw up and throw it all back in her face.”

“That’s not true, lots of mothers fight with their daughters. I’m sure she loves you more than anything else.”

I didn’t want to continue talking. There was static in my head once more, the side effect of this constant

fear, and constant stress I live with every day. We were close to home and I had no idea what to expect. As the squad car pulled up, I thanked the officer for everything and got out.

“Woah, hold your horses!” said the officer, climbing out of her seat. “I can’t leave you until I know you’re safe and sound.”

“B-But my house is right there!”

“I know, Ellie, but I’m afraid that’s just how it goes.”

This was a nightmare.

The officer led me up the pathway towards the door. It opened before we could reach the porch and through the dim light of the hallway, Mother emerged, skin paler than milk, eyes wide with fear. She glanced at me for just a moment, tears building, and then turned to the police officer, silently observing, as though gauging the manner of her presence there.

“Evening, you must be Mrs Davenport?”

“Miss Davenport, yes.”

“Apologies, Ms Davenport. I found your daughter sleeping in Wallace Park. It has come to my attention that you’ve both been involved in a domestic dispute.”

Mother glanced at me once again and I averted my gaze, too scared to look at her. She remained stoically quiet, waiting for the officer to finish speaking before making an assessment.

“In future should something like this happen again, I insist that you do everything you can to calm your



daughter to stop her from running away like this. There is a curfew and it's not safe for a girl of her age to be out on the streets alone. Should you not be successful in doing that then please don't hesitate to call the station right away."

Lifting my head, peering through my periphery, I could see Mother's lower lip wobble. She burst into tears and brought me into her bosom. "I'm so sorry, Ellie!" she said, sobbing into my hair. "I'm so, so very sorry for everything!"

Her embrace was stronger than anything I've ever known as if holding her wasn't quite enough, I had to feel every ounce that she was press into every ounce that was me. In that moment of feeling her warm, motherly love, I experienced the purest of relief and also the purest of love. Deep down, I knew all along she would never kick me out onto the street.

"Don't apologise, I should be the one saying sorry!" I said as we broke apart, wiping each other's tears away.

"Ain't that the nicest thing. You ladies have a good night now," said the officer, turning to leave, but stopping for a beat. She withdrew something that looked like a wallet from her belt and handed Mother a card. "We keep these in the car in case we get reports like this. It's a number for family counselling. It wouldn't hurt to hold onto."

Mother took the card and stared at it for a beat, looking vaguely insulted yet feigning gratefulness. She then smiled and thanked the police officer for everything. She led me back into the hearth that was our home, closing the door behind us before locking it. I was ecstatic to be back. I felt like I was high on an incredible stimulant. But all I wanted in that instant

was a shower and then bed.

“Would you mind if I stayed with you in your bed tonight?” I said, turning to Mother. She was gliding towards the stairs, head turned, and dead quiet. She didn’t seem to hear me. “Mother, can I please sleep in your bedroom, please?” I said again, beginning to feel embarrassed for having to ask again.

Mother silently climbed the stairs without considering my presence. It was like I wasn’t there. I followed her, holding onto the bannister while looking up at her. She stopped on the landing, turned her head slightly over her shoulder, and said, “You may be back, but nothing has changed for you.”

No words can describe how that made me feel.

## 9.

Life changed quite a bit after the Jess incident. For one thing, I was certain to never see Jess or any other fellow school pupil, teacher, or faculty member again. The school was a thing of the past once more and I was unsure of what plans Mother had in store for me next. So ruthless was she in her conquest to punish that I could see no end in sight.

No, I’m not talking about punishments like spankings or cutting up my bras. For me, it was the cold shoulder that was a fate far worse than being kicked out onto the street. It was agonising because she was so close yet so distant. I had ruined her plans to help me become the daughter she could never have and now we were both way off course.

That is until the day she sat me down in the bathroom and cut my hair down to a mere crew cut. I shocked

myself by crying over this, as though I was mourning the loss of a family pet, but to be honest, I think I just wanted Mother to come back to me. Of course, when I asked why she was doing this to me I received no response. She just snipped away until I had a masculine haircut once more.

She then put me inside a breast binder, squeezing all of the c-cup into my chest until it appeared as flat as the days when I was a boy. It was like the corset all over again, except gender was reversed. As I went to bed that night, feeling utterly broken inside, I found a note on my bedroom door that read:

*New room down the end of the hall.*

I went to my new bedroom to discover a plain space with a chest of drawers, a bed, and a nightstand. That was it. That was all I deserved now. Inside the drawers was a basic collection of men's clothing. Plain white t-shirts, blue jeans, grey hoodies, boxer shorts. Did I always dress this plain? I couldn't remember.

More items were added over the following weeks. Deodorant cans, gel, aftershave, everything a man could want and need in his abode. Did I wear any of it? Curiously, no. Did Mother make me? A big part of me wished she would because at least she would have to acknowledge that I existed. Despite my boyish attire, flattened chest, and short haircut, I still looked like a girl because of all the surgeries inflicted on my body and face.

As time went by, I saw less of Mother, as she finally opened her new medical practice. I spent all day every day just idling insignificantly, stuck in a state of limbo. The pills I took every other day also changed and I started to feel incredibly depressed. At night

time, I'd wake up in a pool of my own sweat, as waves of intense hot flushes burst throughout my body.

During daylight, I roamed the house like a zombie, too weak and exhausted to think straight. After a couple of months of this hellish existence, my mental state balanced when Mother started to assign me tasks to do while she was gone all day. No, these were not the usual washing and cleaning I had grown accustomed to since I transitioned. These tasks were far more difficult and would normally be given to strong, masculine men.

Despite having little to no DIY experience, I was forced to build a garden shed from the foundations up to the roof. I worked through rain and shine, slipped through mud, sweat and tears, as my feeble arms rattled and shook under the sheer weight of the lumber and concrete. The only thing that kept me going was my pure, unadulterated rage and the deep desire to win my Mother back and become the daughter she wanted.

But even those motivations wavered.

Mother was forcing me back into what she perceived to be a masculine role, but I still felt like I was Ellie. When Mother discovered I was still shaving my body, she took away all the related paraphernalia. It didn't take long for the hair to return, which messed me up inside. I had never felt more like a freak when I noticed hair growing across my breasts, armpits, and legs. I was beginning to lose faith that I would be forgiven. Testosterone was flowing through my veins once more and I fucking hated it.

After many weeks, I finished the shed while feeling proud of my work, I looked upon it like a sculptor would at their masterpiece. I anxiously waited for

Mother to come home, desperate to get her approval and hopefully put an end to all of this. But all she said was, "Good work, Brian" before going straight up to bed. How many more times must I be crushed until I ended it all for good?

Horrible, unspeakable thoughts flowed through my mind. I fantasised about hurting Mother in the most gruesome, awful ways. I even thought about going to the police. I even thought of ending my own life. I was near the end of my tether, ready to slip away into the void, as all hope was consumed by dread and disdain for my own freakish existence. Without Mother I had nothing. Without the dream of redemption, I had nothing. Without Ellie, I was nobody.

It all changed one August day when Mother sat me down at the kitchen table to speak to me for the first time in what had accounted for six months. I noticed she looked at me differently, in a manner I had not seen since I was Brian. It was a callous look, one bereft of the caring nature I had become enthralled with.

"Brian," she said, piercing my chest with the name, "I want to let you know that I -," She paused for a moment to consider her words. "Please know that I'm deeply sorry for what I've done to you over the past couple of years. I've come to realise that it was cruel and beyond deranged to force you down this path."

*No, no, not this!* I thought.

"The truth is -," Mother croaked, eyes filling with tears. She was shaking. I tried to hold her hand, but she pulled away, shaking her head, as tears squeezed through closed lids. "The truth is that I've never had a daughter. And I'm afraid I never will have one, as my time for that is nearly over. No number of operations

and drugs could account for the fact that you're not a girl and never will be."

"Mother, please, I - "

"You can't call me that anymore, Brian!" Mother snapped. "I'm Faye, just as you've called me all your life. Your real Mother died when you were born!"

Now I was crying. I didn't want Mother's apology. I wanted her to accept mine so we could return to the way we were. "Y-You're right," I said. Talking about the past was making me feel angry. "My biological Mother died before she c-could even hold me. But my real M-Mother, the one I've regretted hurting so much over the past few months, is sitting right here in f-front of me. You can't imagine how much I've tormented over hurting you. All I want is for things to return to how they were."

"We can't," said Mother, quickly shaking her head. "It's too late now."

"No, it's not too late!" I roared, slamming my fist on the tabletop.

Mother leaned back; eyes widened with what I recognized as fear. I already regretted losing the run of myself but I was furious after months of these painful mind games. "There it is," said Mother, eyeing me up and down, like I was a creature to be studied and observed. "There's that male aggression I failed to snuff out."

"I'm only angry because you won't give me what I want!" I cried. I was standing up, shaking with fear and anger. I felt childish. "Why won't you just give it to me?"

“And what is it that you want?”

“The future that you promised me after I left prison! The future where I was to be your daughter and you my Mother, but now you’re denying me that because I – I kissed a girl! I confessed what I did because I trusted you enough to let it slide. I believed that you’d appreciate the fact that I was being honest with you, and now you’re making me go – y-you’re making me a –,”

I couldn’t finish the sentence, too worn out, too broken to accept that it was all over.

“I’m sorry,” said Mother, standing up, unable to meet my eyes. “But it is too late. I’ve already booked your appointments for tomorrow. After that, you can decide what you want to do with me.” She turned to leave the kitchen and I quickly ran in front to block her from leaving.

“What do you m-mean, appointments?”

“With Dr Ford, of course,” said Mother, as if it were obvious. She tried to pass me, but I blocked her again.

“What appointments?” I shouted, feeling like I already knew the answer.

Mother bit her quivering lower lip, folding her arms, preparing herself for something. “He’s going to try and salvage whatever is left and make you into a man again.”

My thoughts accelerated. I tried to slow them so I could breathe, but that was impossible. Heart hammering inside my chest like it belonged to a rabbit running for its skin, I fell to my knees, as the entire

house spun out of control. Mother passed by me and I turned to try to hold onto her, but she was already too far away.

I wanted to say something other than, “No! No! No! No! No!” but that couldn’t be. She disappeared upstairs while I lay on the floor, feeling terribly sick.

When my entire world stopped spinning, rage took over once more and I clambered onto my two feet. I marched up the stairs, down the hallway, and started to bang on Mother’s door. She had locked herself inside, silent, giving me no food for my ranting.

“You can’t do this to me!” I screamed. “After everything I’ve been through you just can’t! You just can’t! Please don’t make me Brian again! I hate him!”

I couldn’t tell you how long I stayed outside that door, crying and whimpering like a mess, head buried between my two legs. All I knew was that the light had faded and I was too distraught, too panicked, to get up and turn on the lights.

After some time, Mother opened the door, making me fall backwards with fright. As I jumped to my feet like an attentive soldier, ready to resume fighting my case, Mother lifted her finger to silence me before I could even draw a breath. A raging fire burned in her eyes that oozed determination, a look I hadn’t seen in a long, long time. A part of me wanted to strike her while the greater sum of my worth wanted to get on my knees and beg her to stop all the hardship.

“Do you want to be a girl again?” she said.

“Y-Yes,” I said. I found it almost hard to believe that I was telling the truth. “More than anything.”



Mother removed her finger from my lips, as she softened into a look of pity and regret. "I'm sorry but you'll never be a girl again." A primal surge to assault with all the strength I had sparked in my stomach before she quickly added, "But you will be a woman."

# PART III

1.

“Dr Davenport’s office, this is Ellie speaking, how may I help you? Oh Mrs Darcy, how are you doing today, my darling? That’s great, I – yes, of course, as per the usual routine. I’m really good, thanks for asking I – pardon? Oh, that’s nice to hear. Do send my regards to Bill. We haven’t seen him in months, which I trust can only be good news. I – yes, I can pencil you in for this Friday. Does nine o’clock suit you? Wonderful, we shall see you then! Bye now!”

Placing the phone back onto the receiver, I looked up to find Mr Mitchell, a burly, middle-aged man on the other side of my desk. His face oozed with blisters. His arms were wrapped around his sides in what I could only decipher as severe pain due to his contorted face. “Apologies for the wait, sir. How may I help you?” I said, sweeter than candy.

“Yes, yes, thank you!” Mr Mitchell barked. “I’ve been sitting here for over forty minutes and I can’t bare another second of this god damned pain! How much longer do I have to wait?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but Dr Davenport is with another patient at the moment. If you would take your seat, you will be called when it’s your turn.”

Mr Mitchell grumbled something under his breath that was undoubtedly kind and understanding. He hobbled back to his seat, scowling and groaning like a pig wounded by arrow fire. I had admitted more than enough patients to know that the man had a low pain threshold and probably would have been better off going straight to the emergency room. Alas, etiquette and professionalism forced me to do no more than smile and reassure him that everything was fine.

Mother's office door opened. "It's no problem, Mr Abernathy," she said, assisting the old man by his arm. "You take care now and I'll see you next month."

I peered over my screen spectacles, observing the concern that radiated from Mother, as she assisted the feeble old man out of the building. I looked at the desktop monitor. The clock was nearing five, which meant the day was coming to a close. When Mother returned, she kindly asked Mr Mitchell to follow her into her office. Before shutting the door, she gave me a knowing smile that told me that everything was A-OK. I smiled back, feeling warm and ticklish inside.

As the door clicked shut, I turned my attention back to the work, updating the patient's information in the system just as protocol demanded. The long, meticulously tidy nails on my fingers, coated with shiny rose pink, were once an incredible irritant for my daily workflow. Now I typed with ease, as I learned to tune out the constant tapping and clacking sound they produced. By the time I was done, so was Mother, who led Mr Mitchell out of the building with a much firmer authority than previous patients.

"You should've gone straight to A&E," Mother said sternly. "There's very little I can do except refer you to the hospital. They will have a specialist in this -," and her voice trailed off, as the entrance door swung itself to a close.

A thick, deafening silence fell upon the waiting room. Lifting my head, I stared at the entrance door through the glass pane, waiting for Mother to return. Nothing was on my mind, I just waited, as my tasks for the day had finally been completed. A yawn escaped my rose-pink smothered lips and a sudden feeling of gratitude fell upon me. The week was nearly over and I felt glad

about it.

Mother returned, quickly locking the door before leaning up against it, eyes closed for a moment, as she basked in relief. “Some people,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Thank goodness that week is over and done with, darling. I don’t think I’ve seen a busier week yet, have you?”

“I don’t believe so,” I said. I busied my hands tidying documents around the desk. “Do you have much more to do before I close up?”

Mother sighed, cracking her neck, as she clip-clopped across the waiting area towards her office. “I shouldn’t be more than fifteen minutes, darling,” she said, yawning.

My bladder reminded me that it needed a quick trip to the girl’s room. I got out of my chair, smoothening the skirt and tugging the blazer down before making my way to the little bathroom. Inside I did my business, washed my hands, and considered the person who was looking back at me from the mirror. The person Mother promised I’d become one day. The person that was the *new* me.

She had long, straight, blonde hair with extensions sown in that flowed down over her shoulder blades. Her skin looked flawlessly clear with the meticulously applied makeup – not a follicle of eyebrow adrift nor a smear on her rose-pink lips. Her teeth belonged to a model that you may find on a toothpaste tube – white as pearls, straight as an arrow, and contrasting starkly to the tanned skin. No more awkward brace face.

Her outfit, elegant and professional, was composed of a stylish black one-button blazer that snugly embraced

her thin waist and toned stomach. The blazer featured slits on the hem and notched lapels that made no effort to hide the massive 36dd breasts that spilt out from between them.

Her blouse, light pink in colour, respectfully hid her cleavage with a delicate bow-knot collar, tied up like a prim, perfect package. Her matching black skirt was slim and tight fitting, revealing her legs from above the knee down to her shiny black stilettos. Such a skirt made no secret of hiding her round bubble butt while straining against her curvaceous hips.

Ellie wasn't a schoolgirl anymore, nor was she an imaginary idea conjured out of Mother's desire for a daughter. She wasn't frightened of embracing her feminine destiny nor had she defied her Mother's wishes for nearly *two years*. She was a woman now. *I* was a woman now. And I never felt more assured that it was the truth. I had my first ever job – a career, if I may, and a salary that paid more money than I could spend thanks to the admin course I took shortly after quitting school. I had a quiet, simple life with Mother, which is all I've ever wanted.

After closing up the practice, Mother drove both of us home. It was such a relief to take off my bra and heels – two items I didn't mind carelessly discarding on the floor. Neither would be acknowledged again until it was absolutely necessary. After removing my makeup, I showered, blow-dried my hair, and applied a face mask. Then I climbed into my comfy pyjamas – a fleece pink top and polka-dotted cotton bottoms. Ah, bliss. Now I could relax after a long hard week.

Normally, Mother and I ordered takeout on a Friday, but tonight I was to eat alone. She was going to see Daniel for the weekend. Dr Daniel Ford, that is.

Yes, he was the surgeon I had become more than acquainted with on many occasions by this point. We were now on a first-name basis.

They started dating about eighteen months ago and have since spent as much time possible together despite the three-hour drive between them. I won't divulge how this made me feel because it frankly doesn't matter at the end of the day. I'm happy when Mother is happy.

Daniel would often phone the office during the week and I would transfer him over to Mother. She transformed into another person by the mere mention of his name. She acted like a schoolgirl whenever I heard her speak to him on the phone.

After every weekend spent with Daniel, Mother always returned a little more melancholic, yet often radiating a glow that told me she was falling deeply in love. I couldn't deny that I saw this coming. From all the checkups I attended after my surgeries, I often saw glimmers of a flirtatious rapport between them. I was saddened that I didn't get to spend as much time with Mother anymore, but as I said, I was happy for her. I really mean that. Honestly!

After Mother left, I snuggled up in the glow of the television with a glass of wine, suddenly thinking about all the times in my life lately when I repeated the same tasks and rituals over and over again. But then I wondered, realistically, if this was all there was for the rest of my life. Repetition was becoming who I was, and to be honest, I didn't mind whatsoever. I had a life. A life I once thought impossible to achieve. A life I felt confident to have complete control over.

Until Adam came along...

## 2.

I must have stared at it for at least thirty seconds without really knowing why. The garment was so delicate in its presentation – the black lacey waistband, the decorative bow on the front. It had minimal coverage on the backside, merely masking the front without leaving much else to the imagination.

*Why, I asked myself, do I feel compelled to buy this g-string?* It made my cheeks burn red hot. Shaking my doubts off, I threw it into the basket and continued browsing the women's section without thought, feeling my heart palpitate with excitement. At times, I caught myself feeling hesitant about being characteristically feminine. Often I had to remind myself there was no shame in it. After all, I was more feminine than most girls I knew.

Pleased with my choices, I brought the basket up to the checkout, throwing in some soaps and lotions while I waited in the queue. "How are you this afternoon, Ellie?" said Clara, the checkout lady, as she scanned my items.

"I'm good, Clara," I said, retrieving my purse from the bag. "Lovely weather today, isn't it?"

"For all good it means to me being stuck in here," said Clara, as she bagged my purchases. "That will be sixty-three, Ellie."

I handed Clara the money, smiled politely, and was on my way.

Working as Mother's secretary meant I got to know many of the Hazelbrook townsfolk. A doctor plays a key role in the fabric of what makes a small town



a community. In the eyes of the citizens, I was that sweet, pleasant woman who always greeted patients with warmth and understanding before their appointments. The place in my mind where all my doubts and anxieties dwelled had faded with time. The exterior world demanded my inner self to uphold the role I was expected to play. The role I was known for. So I deserved to wear a g-string if I wanted to.

Leaving the store felt like walking into an oven. Midday had risen the sun to its highest point, melting the tarmac like bubbling hot liquorice. The thick, stuffy heat shimmered amongst the metallic haze of parked cars. I was glad to be dressed appropriately in my black rhinestone sandals, blue high-waist capri pants, and pink gingham shirt with short cuffed sleeves tied up front over the cropped belly. With the whole weekend free to myself, I wondered what I'd do next to kill the time.

I walked around the streets of Hazelbrook, aimlessly looking at window displays while sipping on a cup of iced tea. I wished the cup contained something stronger. The occasional passersby recognized me from work. A few friendly greetings were exchanged, some a mere smile, others a full-blown chat about the most banal topics. A middle-aged bachelor, Bill James, suffered from a rare skin condition and was unfortunately a space invader. This was one of the reasons I rarely went into town alone. At times I wished I could become invisible, but I suppose in a way, I already was.

I wanted some quiet time. However, I didn't want to go home to that big empty house to be all alone. Eventually, I decided on going to a quiet bar for a drink. Inside the small watering hole, I found a bemused-looking bartender who looked upon me with

the condescension of a man who probably couldn't spell customer service. The other patrons consisted of two drunk old wretches, hunched over their stools, as though they had become part of the furniture.

I instantly felt uneasy, but my feet took me to the bar nonetheless, too stubborn to turn back. "A gin and tonic, please," I said to the barman. While he fetched my drink, I observed my reflection in the back-bar mirror, fixing my hair while trying to ignore the unintelligible mumblings of the men in my periphery. At times I had difficulty registering how voluptuous I had become. Seeing myself in the mirror with the barflies next to me reminded me of how far I had come. And also, how far I had yet to go. I was a flower amongst a bed of thistles.

The barman handed me my drink and I paid him what was due. He didn't say thank you. As I left the barside in search of a secluded booth, I heard one of them whisper, "Did you see the massive titties on her?" and I stopped dead in my tracks. Seething, blinding rage filled me with the colour red. I had two options. I call them out on their perversion or I move on unperturbed. I decided on the latter. Since becoming a member of the community, I came to realize that no manner of retaliation could account for the fact that I get a lot of unwanted attention from men.

I sat in a booth that was hidden from view, unloading a heavy sigh of relief, as I took my first sip. I was just about to feel relaxed when the barman appeared next to me, leaning over me with his arm resting on the upholstery. "Hey, don't mind them assholes," he said, tilting his head towards the bar. "They don't know how to talk to women. Especially beautiful ones."

Ah yes, I had become familiar with this. There

was always one who acts like the nice guy in some worthless attempt to construct a scenario where I had to be protected. I knew no matter how gently I turned him down, rejection would get the better of him, and he would turn everything I said back onto me. So I said nothing and pretended he wasn't there. I could tell he was no threat. He seemed to get the hint and eventually edged away; figurative tail between his legs.

A cloud was closing in on me. I drink to calm it. I kept hearing what the men said about my breasts, replaying it over and over in my mind. Self-consciousness crept in and opened up each vulnerability like an old wound. It had been a while since I experienced the receiving end of vulgar comments. For a brief moment, I felt utterly low and alien inside my body.

My thoughts took me back to over a year ago shortly after my second breast augmentation.

After a long recovery, I was in my bedroom getting dressed for my first day back to work. My hips danced into their pink hipster panties, I remember observing how much my ass jiggled with just the slightest movement, as cellulite slightly hung over the cotton trim. That part of my body had become as round as a blimp and just as big.

But the main aspect of my latest surgeries I had to get used to was the newly augmented, enormous breasts that stuck out of my chest like two swollen melons. I had no choice but to fully experience the constant awareness they bore on my life. After slipping into a pair of tights and a black knee-high pencil skirt, I took the white cap-sleeved blouse and struggled to close the buttons. Frustrated and a tad embarrassed, I angrily looked through my wardrobe for something else to wear.

“How are you finding them?”

I turned to find Mother standing in my doorway. Startled, I had no clue she was there, or rather how long she had been watching. “They’re wonderful, Mother,” I said, heat building in my cheeks. “I finally feel like a full-grown woman.”

Mother smiled. “You don’t have to humour me, Ellie. You can tell me how you really feel.”

“No, I really do love them,” I said, vaguely unsure if that was the right answer. “Obviously it will take some getting used to what with all the new clothes I’ll have to buy and ah – well, you know.”

“I have yet to see the results of Daniel’s latest operation,” said Mother, inviting herself into my room. “Do you mind if I see?”

“M-My breasts?”

“Yes, Ellie,” said Mother, sighing deeply. “If you don’t mind.”

“...oh – okay,” I said. I lowered my head, hands reaching behind my back to unhook the clasps. It’s taking me longer than usual because my fingers fumble and tremble like jelly. When I’m finally successful, the two fleshly mounds encased within the pink lace cups pour out into plain view, and I gasped. Unsure of what to do, I bow my head in shame, utterly scarlet-faced. I waited for Mother to say something. I’d take anything if it helped break the tension.

Mother drew a deep breath and I knew not to speak. “Let me fill you in on one of many facts about being a woman, Ellie. Those breasts are certain to attract

the leering eyes of the opposite sex. This is something you will have to get used to. There will be times when you'll receive vulgar, inappropriate comments. There will be times when you struggle to hide them. There may also be times when one man will chance his arm and attempt to grope you. It's unfortunate, yes, but that's how some men behave."

I looked up to meet her all-powerful gaze, startled by the glare of sincerity in her eyes. I couldn't help but wonder why she was telling me this. I had ideas, but I wasn't sure if I was ready to face up to them. "Luckily...", Mother added. "You are not the type of woman who will give in to the lure of wandering eyes. You are mature, graceful, and powerful. You don't sleep around. You are the kind of woman who's looking for a man to settle down with."

Startled by Mother's words, I could only leave my ears open while keeping my lips sealed. I felt terribly scared by what she was telling me. I could only look down, but even then I was reminded of the source of my embarrassment. I could only go to the faraway place deep within my mind. I had no idea how close Mother was to me until she spoke again. "Can you imagine," she whispered. She raised her hand and cupped it onto my left breast. "If you would close your eyes, darling."

I obeyed Mother's command and closed my eyes, breath quivering while her hand gave my left breast a single, gentle squeeze. I was only thinking one thing. *What the hell is happening?*

"Picture it," Mother whispered, slowly circling her finger around my areola. "Imagine the gentle brush of his lips against yours. Imagine feeling the warmth and security of his arms around you. Nobody can ever

harm you this way.” A gentle pinch on my nipple sent ecstatic shivers throughout my body. Goose flesh protruded from my skin while on my arms and the nape of my neck tiny hairs stood to attention. I wanted to open my eyes, but I couldn’t do it for I must do as Mother commands. She continued to fondle my breast, increasing pressure on the nipple until it became unbearable. “You are safe with him,” Mother whispered. “You are safe in his arms.”

I finished my gin and tonic quicker than intended. A wave of calm fell over me like a warm blanket around my shoulders. Looking down at my cleavage with its black lace trimmings, I no longer felt sheepish of my, what shall we call them? – Assets. *This is what you want, I told myself, this is what you begged for when it was taken from you.*

I pushed my indecision down while I focused on controlling my breath. As the dark cloud faded, I looked around for something to distract me. My eye was drawn to the painting inside the booth wall. It was an expressionist-style work of a lush green forest. The subject was a little girl running away through the canopy with a basket of lilies in tow. It made me feel inexplicably warm with a heartbreaking sting. She had only been gone for over a day, but I missed my Mother.

I had another drink. After that, I had another. It didn’t take me long to start feeling the drowsy intoxicating effects of the gin. Each drink after the other feels like a better idea than the last. I had the barman under my thumb, as he continued to fetch my orders in exchange for a mere smile. The drink gave me the confidence to irresponsibly abuse my sexuality. Soon I could barely keep my head on a swivel and I decided that I should go home before dark.

More patrons had joined the front of the bar, but luckily I was hidden from view. They were unnecessarily loud, boisterous, and appeared to be all men. I didn't want to draw any attention from them so I thought hard about an alternative exit. The alcohol fogging up my brain, I remembered there was only the front door. I had to be quick. I gathered up my shopping bags, purse awkwardly dangling from the crook of my arm, as I straightened myself up. While attempting to leave quietly, a hail of cat-calls and vulgar shouts assaulted my dignity like a shower of flying daggers.

Hey darling, wanna drink?

Why don't you come over here and sit on my lap?

Check out that almighty ass!

*Awh look fellas, you scared her!*

I was furious. Holding onto the exit door, I turned to face the drunken fools and held up my middle finger. This was met with uproarious laughter and thus my dignity was shattered into a million pieces. I left the bar trying my best to stop the onslaught of tears from demeaning me further.

*I hate men!*

### 3.

About eighteen months ago, shortly after I got my braces removed, I began going back and forth between home and Daniel's clinic. I underwent extensive electrolysis to permanently remove the hair follicles on my face, chest, and armpits over a series of sessions. I was told it could take months to finish. I never had

much hair to begin with due to the hormones and beauty care. When the hair briefly returned after Mother's equitable and deserving lesson, I was glad to know it would be erased for the sake of my future.

It started as a weekly session. Mother had just started dating Daniel at the time so I accompanied her to his private clinic each weekend. While the two love birds strolled about the elaborate estate gardens, sickeningly doe-eyed and holding hands, I was indoors having each hair follicle destroyed by precise needles. It wasn't too painful, but the two ladies carrying out the procedure were beyond kind and understanding of my discomfort.

These weekend procedures became part of my weekly routine. Soon I became acquainted with the few people who worked in the clinic, namely the two nurses, but that's all there was to my knowledge. I also became rather familiar with the clinic grounds. I must have explored every part of the gardens around the estate. I often wondered why so much effort and care was put into these lush and colourful greeneries while the house wasn't exactly well kept.

One day I discovered why.

I was upstairs in my bedroom resting while curled up on the windowsill observing the grey and murky world on the other side. I noticed the electronic gate open and Daniel's car emerged with Mother in the passenger seat. My heart leapt with urgency, like an excited dog anxiously watching its master approach from the window after a long day of waiting. We were going home after dinner that night so I was relieved that I didn't have to sit around for much longer.

I was about to go meet them downstairs when I



noticed a man emerge from the hedge grow at the bottom of the garden. A curious sight nonetheless. I had never seen him before but it looked like he was working on the grounds. Even though he was far away he looked massive. I'd say he was about 6'7. He was dressed in grey overalls stained with dirt and mud.

Even though he was outrageously tall, he was by no means gangly or clumsy looking. He was lean and strong and wore a serious expression on the front of his bald egg-like head while walking up the driveway. Suddenly without warning, he glanced up at me and gave a quick wave before continuing onward. I waved back, unsure if he saw me before disappearing beneath me.

Later that evening, I ate dinner with Mother and Daniel in the dining room. We usually dressed up for dinner. I wore a slim-fitting blue satin blouse, cap-sleeved, buttoned to the top and tucked into a black leather skater mini skirt, barelegged bar the black ballet flats.

The happy couple did most of the talking while I quietly ate. To not seem anti-social, I occasionally joined in with a quick question regarding one of the many dull anecdotes regarding their day together. Mostly I kept my head bowed because, to be honest, I didn't like seeing Daniel hog all of Mother's attention. At one point silence fell upon the table, which left the field open.

"So how is your treatment coming along, Ellie?" said Daniel. He was cutting his steak a little too firmly for my liking. "I hope the girls are being extra careful. It's very delicate work."

"I daresay their hands are steadier than yours,

Daniel,” I said wryly.

Daniel chuckled and Mother followed, as though waiting for him to laugh first. “That’s good to hear,” said Daniel. “What else did you get up to today?”

“Nothing much compared to other weekends,” I said. I decided to slow down my eating because I needed it as a prop to focus on. “I saw a man today.”

“A man?” said Mother, brow raised.

“He just walked out of the bushes with hedge-cutters. I never noticed him before.”

“Ah, that’s my son Adam,” said Daniel, the chair creaking as he leaned back to let his belly out. “He was doing work on the garden today. He has his own landscaping company, you know – a very successful one I might add.”

“Oh, I never knew you had a son.”

Mother and Daniel shared a cheeky wink I tried to ignore, but there was something about their naive assumption that made me blush. I was merely curious, trying to make conversation, but they misread my observation like I was some foolish child with a fledgling crush. It was embarrassing.

“Was he not to join us, Daniel?” said Mother.

“Well he was supposed to,” said Daniel, glancing at the grandfather clock, “but I reckon he’s late because of the pines out back. He’ll probably join us –”

We could hear him before we could see him. Plate in hand with a pint of milk in the other, Adam’s feet

clomped heavily against the hardwood, as he lowered his head under the doorway. "Hello Dad," he said in a slow gruff voice. He nodded stiffly towards his father before sitting next to me. "Nice to see you again, Faye."

"Likewise, Adam, likewise," Mother beamed as she took his hand. "You haven't met my daughter yet, have you?"

"Not formally," said Adam.

Adam's huge hand took my shamefully tiny one. He then quietly ate his food without saying another word. I was surprised by how comfortable he was immediately letting everything fall into an awkward silence the second after he arrived. He certainly was no talker. I was even more surprised that he was Daniel's son because of his enormous size. Daniel was a short, silver fox with shining dimple eyes and a pot belly. Whereas Adam was tall, strong and serious.

While we quietly finished our dinners, Adam and Daniel discussed the garden for all but a few essential sentences and that was it until silence fell again. I couldn't wait to get out of there. Bags ready in tow, we were shown to the door after the dessert settled in our stomachs. Adam leaned into to kiss both Mother and me on the cheek, which made me blush uncontrollably simply because it caught me off guard. Even though I only just met him, it didn't seem to align with my initial impression of him.

"Nice meeting you, Ellie," he said. "I'm sure we'll meet again soon. Safe journey, Faye."

"Thanks, Adam, you are too kind," said Mother. "Ellie darling, why don't you wait in the car? I'll be along in

a moment.”

I did as Mother asked and waited in the passenger seat. Twiddling my thumbs, I looked down to avoid whatever canoodling she was probably doing with Daniel. Regrettably, I glanced up for a mere second to find them snogging each other’s faces right there on the porch. Disgusting. She climbed into the car vaguely dishevelled, which she quickly remedied in the pull-down mirror.

“And so ends another week,” she said before igniting the engine.

Most of the three-hour trip back to Hazelbrook was a quiet one, but I felt something simmering beneath the surface. “So what did you think of Adam?” Mother finally asked.

I knew the question would come sooner or later. It was like walking on eggshells. I had already thought of an answer that would appease Mother’s intrigue. “He seems like a regular, hardworking man,” I said. “That’s all really.”

I wasn’t giving her enough. From her tensing shoulders, I sensed impatience, as though she wanted me to elaborate on what I meant, but truly there was nothing more to say. I had no opinions to divulge.

“Well don’t you think he’s handsome?” said Mother after a long pause.

Something happened in that instant. I went to another place far away from the car. Physically I was still there, but mentally I disassociated myself from everything around me. I could hear Mother repeat the question until she started calling my name. “Ellie, are

you okay?”

The prospect of being with another man hung over me ever since the Jess incident, but I chose to ignore it and focus on proving my unyielding femininity in other parts of my life. I never intended to look at another girl ever again for all the trouble it caused me, but I wasn't prepared to look at men either. It was utterly unclear if I had a choice in the matter. I didn't want to fight Mother about it yet I didn't want to act upon it myself because, well, I didn't like men *that* way.

“Sorry, Mother,” I said, crashing back into reality. “What were you saying?”

“I was just wondering if you thought Adam was handsome.”

“...I-I-”

“Forget it,” said Mother, waving me off, as though I was an irritating fly. “It's a simple yes or no question. I was only trying to connect with you, darling.”

“I-I just don't know if – I mean,” I stammered. My brain was malfunctioning again. Amid all the panic, I sought only to leap at the chance of pleasing Mother for a salve. Or to *connect* with her, as she said. “I – I guess he's aesthetically pleasing.”

Mother didn't answer right away. She was focused on the road ahead. “Well that's wonderful, darling,” was all she said.

#### 4.

The moment Mother returned late that Sunday night, all of the nasty feelings that came after confronting

the barflies went away. I pushed them down hard, hoping they wouldn't resurface to threaten me again. *I am a woman now. I am a woman now. I am a woman now.*

"What did you get up to for the weekend?" said Mother, throwing her bag and keys onto the kitchen island.

"Nothing much, I just went shopping in town, enjoyed the nice weather and then home again to do some chores," I said. "You?"

Mother couldn't wait for me to ask, as her face lit up like a happy jack-o-lantern. "Oh it was gorgeous!" she beamed. "Daniel took me on a riverboat cruise. We went all the way down this old river and we were shown around this beautiful old castle. Oh, it was simply divine!"

"Sounds lovely," I said, leaning against the counter, teeth grinding. I hated hearing about Daniel, but I felt obliged to ask to save face. "Did you do anything else?"

"Oh the usual fare, darling," said Mother, unpacking the groceries she brought home. "We had dinner on the estate and – oh I saw Adam for the first time in months actually. He was asking for you, darling."

"Asking for me?" I said, perplexed.

"Yes, darling, asking how were, what you're up to, and so on."

Strange, I thought, why would he ask about me a year and a half after our only encounter? I decided not to ask any further questions for fear of planting an idea in Mother's head. I didn't know how much

longer I could ignore the hints to hook up with him, but I noticed a wry smile on her face that told me she was up to something. I already felt terrible for not divulging the details of my little escapade in the bar the previous day. Instead, I just said goodnight before going up to bed.

In the morning, I was up bright and early and ready for work. After showering and blow-drying my hair, I took out the curling wand, which I hadn't used since getting the extensions. My natural hair must have grown to my shoulders since Mother cut the previous growth off, but I sort of enjoyed having hair flow down my back. I decided the night before that I wanted my light blonde hair to be wavy and summery to compliment the scorching weather outside.

When I completed my hair, I applied a light touch of makeup, making sure to not skimp on the pink lip gloss. After slipping into a pair of teal tanga panties, I heaved my breasts into their respective homes for the day within the red-laced full cupped bra. Around my bust, I buttoned up a white, puff-shouldered blouse with elbow-capped sleeves and a rounded collar fastened to the top.

After that, I stepped into a pink and white checkered pinafore mini dress that hugged my breasts and waist snugly while flaring the skirt out of my hips. Finally, I stepped into a shiny new pair of pink suede stilettos, courtesy of Mother's gift to me on my last birthday. I felt suitably girly, professional, and ready to tackle another week's work.

At work, I carried out my usual duties throughout the day – logging prescriptions, booking appointments, receiving patients, filing info and so on. It turned out to be quite a busy day. The door never stopped opening

and I was glad for it since time disappeared quickly. Then came the dead zone where no appointments came in for about an hour. The phone only rang once.

“Dr Davenport’s office, this is Ellie speaking, how may I help you?” I said.

“Hello Ellie,” said a low, gruff voice on the other end. There was a long pause.

“Hello to you too, sir. Now, how may I help you today?”

“Umm, it’s me, Ellie,” said the voice. It was hard to hear the man because he was mumbling. “I’m not sure if you remember me. We met over a year ago. Your mother, she’s my is my father’s partner. I’m his son, Adam.”

My brain stuttered for a moment and my eyes take in more light than I expected, every part of me goes on pause while my thoughts try to catch up. I asked myself why the hell he was ringing me, but deep down, I already knew.

“Are you there?”

“Yes,” I said, acutely aware that Mother was likely to be listening on the other end. “Yes, Adam, I remember you. What can I do for you?”

“Um, how are you?” said Adam, voice wobbling.

“I’m good and you?”

“Pretty nervous to be honest.”

Something was out of place. The ideas in my head



became all the clearer, but I could only disassociate myself from them, too scared and unbelieving of what might happen. I soldiered on bravely, trying to digest the utmost incredulity that would soon turn to panic.

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said, retaining my telephone voice. "Do you need to book an appointment or is there something else I can assist you with?"

"I'm nervous because of what I'm about to ask you," said Adam. He cleared his throat, slight credence entering his tone. "Look I'm no good at this sort of stuff, I – I haven't asked a girl to – you know, since school and even then I – I'm really screwing this up. Sorry."

An overpowering urge to pull the plug on what was about to happen overcame me. I lowered the phone from my ear to put it onto the receiver, but that's when I heard from the little speaker what Adam wanted to ask me. "You don't have to say yes, but would you like to go out with me sometime?"

A mere inch from hanging up, my bowls churned at the fateful question, and I wished for nothing more than to be taken away from the awkward situation. I glanced at Mother's office door, which was left slightly ajar. I could imagine her in there, anxiously listening to the call machine, mouthing, *Say yes, darling! Say yes!* For a second I imagined how she would react if I said no and that was enough for me to lift the phone again.

"Y-Yes," I said, hand shaking on the receiver. "That would be nice."

Adam's voice transformed. "That's great! Wow! Thank you – I mean, brilliant. I'm busy this weekend but I'm free for the one after if you are."

“Yes, brilliant,” I said, chest tightening with each second passing. “I-I’ve got another call on the line. It could be a very ill person and we’re very busy. I best get back to work now. Bye-bye.”

“Great! I’ll call you. Bye!”

I immediately jumped to my feet, smoothed my skirt, and swished out of my office. Clip-clopping across the waiting area, Mother’s immediate presence stopped me in my tracks. Turning around, I looked upon her standing in her doorway, hands clenched tightly to her bosom like she was about to explode everywhere.

“I just heard over the call machine!” she beamed. “I can’t believe it!”

Breath quivering through a deep sigh, I gave all my strength to form a smile; uncertain if my effort could possibly register on my face. “It’s hard to believe,” I said, truthfully.

Mother appeared before me and took me into her arms. “This is so exciting!” she said into my ear. Breaking away she held my hands and looked deep into my eyes with a near-crazed glint. “We’ll have to get you a new outfit. Oh and a trip to the salon. You haven’t been in ages. You can get all dolled up – hair, makeup, the works! It’s on me – oh sorry, sorry, I’m just so happy for you! How are you feeling?”

“It feels great, Mother. I’m beginning to feel more like a woman every day,” I said, unable to bear another second of being near her. I know, my *own* Mother. “Apologies, I don’t mean to cut across you, but I’m dying to go to the girls’ room.”

“Yes, of course, don’t let me keep you!”

Turning on my heels, the tears I held back with every ounce of my will spilt from my eyes. Wetness created warm rivers through my meticulously applied makeup. My hand was barely able to work the bathroom doorknob due to trembling fingers. I could only ask myself one question. *Why?* There was no doubt Mother was behind this courtship. Why else would Adam call me after such a long time? I felt deeply hurt – no, *betrayed* that she didn't consult me first.

How could I possibly date another man? What if he – no, I refused to let my thoughts go there and focused on my strained breath. My pinafore dress suddenly felt rather tight, like it was shrinking, squeezing every breath from my lungs.

*Calm down, Ellie, I said to myself, you are a woman now. You are a woman now. You are a woman now. This is what you wanted when it was taken from you. This is what you want more than anything.*

## 5.

After kissing Jess, Mother made it clear I was not to mess around with girls. I gladly accepted the order but chose to ignore what instantly established itself as the inevitable. One day I'd probably be forced to date a man and that dreaded day had finally come.

I ignored all the pretence Mother made towards the sexual orientation she assigned me, because well, I've never once felt attracted to another man yet here I was in a salon having my hair and makeup done in preparation for a date. And with a *man* nonetheless. The anxiety I felt was extraordinary.

I was too tired to talk to the overzealous stylists who did nothing but babble and bitch about the most inane

topics I had little interest in discussing. I was in a bad mood. I hadn't been sleeping well. When I was awake, I couldn't stand being awake, and when I was asleep it was solid nightmares. In one memorable one, I was in a maze being chased by a faceless man who successfully tackles me to the ground. While I violently kicked and struggled, the man's hands slither up my skirt, pull my knickers down, and – then I awoke to quail with dread, heart pounding inside my chest.

The root of my anxieties stemmed from the fact that I didn't know Adam, nor could I approach him from a female perspective. Like a zoetrope on an endless spin, I couldn't stop my mind from weaving potential scenarios of how the date could go. How was I expected to just sit there and let him hold my hand? How could I possibly keep eye contact? What if he tried to kiss me? I didn't believe I was capable of being with a man in *that* way. I was content in being a single woman without preference for either sex, but now I feared my inaction had taken the choice out of my hands.

At first, I felt terribly frustrated with Mother for setting me up with Adam. Disrupting the life I'd finally grown accustomed to by trying to find me a – I'm sorry, it just feels strange to say – a *boyfriend* sent me back to a dark place I thought I had left behind. A place that felt rather close to Brian and all of his objections and crude masculinity. All of which had slowly withered before blossoming into the subservient woman I was today. It did really feel like a betrayal.

It didn't take long but a powerful wave of guilt consumed me for accusing Mother of such a thing. Perhaps she wasn't behind the courtship. After all, I had no hard evidence to prove otherwise. It might have taken Adam a whole year to muster up the courage to

ask me. He was painfully nervous after all. Or perhaps Mother grew impatient with my inaction in finding a partner that she finally took matters into – *no, stop!* All of this was surely for my betterment. It had to be. Maybe this was part of her great plan for my future. One last hurdle before making her vision complete. It's just, I didn't feel very comfortable. It felt like a step too far.

My hair was cut with a new set of extensions sewn in to last me for another three months. The bright blonde sheen glistened like the sun, softer than silk, and straighter than an arrow. My makeup and nails were done by a couple of beauticians who made me look like a girly girl set for a night on the town. Smoky eyes with expertly applied mascara and shadow gave me a real *insta-look* along with the false nails inserted into my cuticles, painted bright pink to match the pedicure.

The prettier they made me look the more uneasy I became with my increasingly heightened sexuality. My girlishness no longer felt like the source of power I learned to harness over the years. Now it seemed like I was being prepped as man-bait, ready to be swept off my feet, and taken into the woods to have who knows what done to me. It was especially distracting seeing Mother in the background, watching everything like a hawk over the rim of her magazine.

When we got home things only got worse.

I was standing in front of the full-length mirror, observing my stark naked body while Mother rummaged through my clothes. My perspective had changed from two years ago. While I learned to embrace power, grace, and femininity, all of it suddenly felt like it happened in vain. My supple, buxom hourglass figure gave me the impression that I

was truly ripe for the pickings, like unconsciously for the past two years, I was being groomed for a man to ravish me. Perhaps Mother, the all-powerful influence of my life, had intended for all of this to happen.

*No! I told myself. Stop overthinking this. Mother loves you and this is what you want!*

“Darling, did I buy this for you?” said Mother. Snapping out of my trance, I looked to Mother who was holding up the g-string I bought a few weeks back.

“Uh, no, I got that a few weeks ago.”

“Huh, still has the tag on it,” said Mother, reading the label. “Perhaps you should try it out under your skirt. After all, it’s quite warm out and you’re only young once.”

Suddenly, I regretted buying the cursed thing. I bent over and placed each foot into the openings, slithering it all the way up my legs until the rear sunk into my butt. I may as well have gone commando since I felt no difference bar the vague discomfort of the string sinking between my cheeks.

“Ah, I remember the days when I was able to wear such a thing. You should consider yourself lucky,” said Mother, standing over my shoulder with a plain black push-up bra in hand. She lifted my breasts into each cup before fastening and adjusting them into a neat cleavage. “Now, that’s much better.”

Next came the deep v-necked halter top, black in colour, tight as a second skin, and revealing a healthy abundance of cleavage. “Mother, you always make excellent choices when recommending outfits to wear.

I really like this top, but don't you think it's a little, well, *revealing* for a first d-date?"

"Darling, you didn't get those silicone beauties just so you could hide them," said Mother, fidgeting with the neckline. "Now step into your skirt and be a good girl." I averted my gaze in shame, catching a quick glimpse of my blushing face in the mirror while I stepped into the next article.

Mother lifted the box-pleated, pastel pink mini skirt up over my knees. The smooth fabric gently brushed against my thighs until the band, adorned with a large bow on the front, settled around my waist. She tugged and adjusted, fully tucking the halter top inside the band. The skirt was so short I was certain anyone smaller than I would be able to see my underwear if they tried hard enough to look. I knew I would be tugging at the hem all evening to prevent it from riding up.

"What I would give to have a figure like yours, darling," said Mother, putting some silver bangles on my wrist.

"You still have a lovely figure, Mother."

"Do stop. These heels next, darling."

Mother handed me a pair of cork wedge heels. I put them on awkwardly due to the false pink nails on my fingers. Fastening the black leather strap around my ankle, I wriggled my toes through the opening to assure it all fit.

Then the doorbell rang...

Mother looked at her watch. "Surely that couldn't –

he's not due for another twenty minutes," she said, vaguely annoyed as she left the room.

I was breathing heavily. Not from the heat or fatigue, not from lack of physical capability. From fear. Genuine fear. This was it. This was the moment I tried to avoid for so long. I had lost myself in constructing scenarios for the evening ahead. I was surprised at how far I had come. The skirt and top that hung so limply in my closet were now the only separations between my naked skin and the evening breeze outside. I grabbed my beige knitted cardigan, unable to button it up due to my wavering, cat-clawed fingers. I gave up, my mind scattered in too many places to think clearly.

I could hear Adam's baritone voice reverberate from downstairs while Mother greeted him with loud and uproarious glee. I felt strongly compelled to down a substantial amount of gin from the bottle hidden under my bed. You know, for dutch courage, but I was out of time. The smell on my breath would surely anger Mother if she got a scent. It wasn't worth the hassle.

"Ellie, are you ready?" Mother called up the staircase.

"On my way down!" I yelled, voice cracking.

Mother's loud cackle rattled me to the bones while I slowly moved down the upstairs corridor. All the reasons not to go on the date came flooding in as if my body chemistry just sent them a blanket invitation. I felt the soft panic that could grow or fade depending on what I did next. It will fade if I back away, but then I have to do this all again another time. As I said. This was inevitable. It will grow if I let my precarious thoughts swirl into a vortex of stupidity, eating their



own tail. Or I could breathe real slow, let the thoughts leak into the ether and just be Ellie.

*This what you want, I told myself. This is what you want.*

The immediate sight of Adam standing at the bottom of the stairs intimidated me beyond belief. He still kept his head shaved but now bore a scraggly beard that somewhat mocked the man in me that never was. Step by step down the stairs, I gradually shrunk in the shadow of his massively tall frame, feeling all the more naked, as the open door breeze that shoots up my skirt. I felt uncomfortably delicate, like some precious prize to doted upon.

“Hello, Ellie,” he said, seemingly too embarrassed to look at me properly. He was dressed in a plaid shirt and dark denim jeans, like some sort of a hygiene-conscious lumberjack. “Long time no see.”

“Yes it has been a long time,” I said.

Unable to look at him for more than a second, I turned to Mother who looked vaguely worried, like she was a little afraid to part ways. “Have fun, darling,” she said with a tight-lipped smile on her face, as though informing me that everything would be okay.

Unfortunately, I didn’t feel that would be the case. She buttoned up my cardigan for me, ensuring to leave the top few open so my “silicone beauties” would be on view.

I jumped when Adam suddenly slapped his hands together to break the tension. “Right, well we best be off,” he said, eyes everywhere but on me. “As always it was nice to see you, Faye. I’m sure I’ll see you at Dad’s some weekend soon.”

“You two have a wonderful evening,” said Mother, leading us both outside.

For a brief second, Adam placed his hand on my lower back when we stepped off the porch. He removed it quicker than a hand from a hot plate. Perhaps he sensed my discomfort, but if I didn’t know any better, I assumed he was just as, if not more, nervous than I. He opened the passenger door of his colossal truck and helped me up. The heels made certain I wasn’t fit to attempt it for myself.

When Adam climbed into his seat and shut the door, an intense feeling of entrapment swept over me as if I had just fallen into a bear’s den with no visible escape. My nose stung with the pungent scent of an aftershave confined within the surprisingly clean cab. I kept my eyes fixed firmly on the glove compartment, tugging at the hem of my skirt, fearful of exposing my barely-covered privates. I could feel his eyes on me, I was sure of it, but I couldn’t meet them. No way.

Adam drove onto the road and kicked into full gear up Seafront Drive while I watched my home shrink in the rear-view mirror. Unable to form a coherent sentence, I tried to break the ice and say something, anything would do, but I truly felt paralyzed.

“So, uh, I was thinking we could go to the movies over in Milltown,” said Adam. “They’ve got one of those old-school drive-ins during the summer. What do you say we see something?”

“Yes, that would be nice,” I said, lamenting the trip ahead.

For a moment, I felt brave enough to look at him. His gaze was focused on the road ahead, appearing

familiarly stoic, like a man who was used to being alone with his thoughts. Mere minutes had passed, but it seemed like the longest time I had spent alone with a man since prison.

“So do you like movies, Ellie?”

“Yes,” I said, close to a whisper.

“Well, that’s a relief. I wouldn’t want to take you to the movies if you didn’t even watch them.”

What felt like hours was merely seconds of deafening quiet that fell upon the cab. Heart throbbing in my throat, I tried to think of something to say. “W-What are we seeing?” I said, seemingly unable to bring my voice pitch down from its squeaky heights. “Ahem, s-sorry!”

“Who knows,” said Adam, briefly glancing at me. “I know this place shows classics so I reckon we’ll just rock up and go in blind if that suits you.”

“Yes, Mot – I mean, Adam,” I said, blushing ferociously. And then without pause, I awkwardly stumbled into chit-chat. “S-So how’s work been?”

I could hear the words coming from Adam’s mouth but none of them made sense. I went to another place far away where I couldn’t listen to him through the fog of my crippling nerves. For some reason I pictured myself in my old school uniform, lying face down on Mother, breast-to-breast and eye-to-eye, in front of an open fire. Cruelly, I tore myself away back into reality. “S-Sorry, Adam, could you say that again?” I said, trying my best to concentrate.

*Come on, Ellie. Get a grip. Just talk!*

“I’ve been busy,” said Adam, nodding stiffly. “It’s the busiest time of year for landscaping. I’ve had to put a lot of work in myself this year because the new workers I hired are terrible.”

“Well,” I said, confidence scrambling to its feet. “Why d-don’t you just fire them?”

Adam pondered this for a moment, nodding as though conversing and agreeing with his inner thoughts. “No I couldn’t do that to them, to be honest,” he said, shaking his head. “They may be the lousiest workers I’ve hired but they’re decent guys. I can put up with it for a season.”

He took a moment to turn on the radio that emitted the drawl of a sad country song I hadn’t heard in years. “How’re things in admin? Dad told me you work for your Mother.”

“It’s okay,” I said, unable to make it sound exciting. “L-Lots of sick people.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.”

After a forty-minute drive, I had run out of things to say. There was only so much I could talk about the weather and current events until the well of thought became dry. I was grateful we were seeing a movie since I wouldn’t have to endure the chit-chat for much longer. However, anticipating being too close to Adam brought on a new set of worries to deal with.

As we drove through Milltown, we passed by a rundown motel that evoked a memory I had long repressed. Years had passed since I reached the EZ Motel after attempting to escape Mother’s grip, and here I was, a fully transitioned woman on her first

date with a man. If only I could go back in time to inform Brian that everything would be okay so long as he trusted Mother, even if he had to do things he never once dreamed of doing. I – I was different back then.

When we arrived at the drive-in Adam insisted on buying us a large popcorn and drink to share despite snacks being the last thing on my mind. The place was smaller than expected. The lot could fit no more than fifteen cars that occupied all but two spaces. Adam pulled his truck into one of the vacancies right in front of the massive screen, which took up my entire field of view.

Benumbed to Adam's words, all I gathered about the film's premise was that it was a sixties cult classic I had never heard of. We both stared at the blank screen, interminably waiting for the images to flicker on. The low humming chatter of all the patrons, many of which were couples, filled the hushed atmosphere in concurrence with mouths crunching on sweets and popcorn.

"If you're going to sit over there for the whole movie, I'll end up eating all of this myself," said Adam, patting the space next to him. "I won't bite you."

*Oh no, I thought, this is how it begins!*

With great trepidation, I slid over to next to Adam, his strong scent becoming increasingly apparent in close quarters. The popcorn slipped into my periphery and I reluctantly took one. The scanty delicacy of my uncomfortable attire and the soft, perfumed girliness of my makeover made me feel oddly ashamed to sit so close to this enormous specimen. This hairy bulk of a man could do anything if he wanted to. It would take no effort for his wandering hand to slip under my skirt

and meet my private parts. The mere thought of it disturbed me to no end.

The film began to play and I could focus on nothing else but what may or may not happen. My heart was pounding so fast that I believed cardiac arrest was on the horizon. The film wore on and I could barely comprehend the story, as I was too wrapped up in a tangled ball of nerves. Each time I took a curious glimpse at the man next to me, I felt a little more reassured that he wasn't a pervert. He was surprisingly engrossed in what was happening on the screen. His eyes shone like that of a child in wonderment. For some time, he seemed to forget that I was right next to him.

When the film ended Adam drove me home. Not a single move had been attempted on his behalf and I was grateful for it. All the fear and anxiety were for nothing. He seemed to transform from a stoic introvert into an excited enthusiast, as he talked about the film at great length. Much of the plot didn't register with me, but I pretended I knew what he was talking about by agreeing with everything he said. Better that than silence.

Darkness had fallen by the time Adam pulled up outside the house. And thus began the awkward passing of ways. "I had a good time tonight, Ellie," said Adam, nervously drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. "Did you?"

"Yes," I cheeped. I couldn't look at him. I only felt compelled to jump out of the cab and run inside to Mother where I felt safe. "Thanks for t-taking me out."

"No problem," said Adam. He was waiting for

something to happen. “You know, I never thought I’d get the courage to ask you out. Your Mom helped me a lot when she told me you were interested. So let me ask you again. Would you go on a second date with me?”

“Okay,” I said. “That would be nice. Call me and let me know.”

I hopped out of the cab before any funny business could happen, waving goodbye through the window; desperate to get away quickly. Pressing a palm to my chest, my rigid body slumped, as I let out a huge breath of relief. Curiously, I started to laugh. I was relieved of all stress and worry for all but a few minutes until it dawned on me that my time with Adam was only just beginning.

## 6.

My first date with a man didn’t turn out as I expected. My head had been so clouded by a veil of fear that I never considered the facts. Traditionally first dates were free of all sexual contact, rather, it was about simply getting to know your date.

If I had an opinion of Adam, it was certainly different than the one I had before getting into his truck. He seemed gentle, kind, and curiously shy for a man who looked so large and intimidating. I didn’t detect any ulterior devilish motives.

Yet despite being a gentleman, when it came down to the crux of it, that’s exactly what he was; a man. And I knew that at one point or another, I’d have to – I – I can’t even say it. We were dating. It was inevitable.

Mother was in flying form the whole week after. She

seemed to relish in the romance of us dating a father and son, often dreaming up fantasies of double dates that I hoped would never happen. She constantly lectured me on the politics of courtship, teaching me how to flirt and when not to flirt, but mostly I pretended to listen. I had no plans of putting her advice into action. All I focused on was how I could handle the second date that coming weekend without falling deeper into the arms of Adam.

While working through the busy Wednesday, Adam phoned me to inform me of the plans. He asked if I'd like to spend that coming Saturday at the beach, as the last heatwave of the summer was forecast to arrive that day. I had no other choice but to agree, conscious that I'd probably have to buy a swimming costume. Mother took care of that the moment I informed her of our plans.

Before I could say – or rather, think the words *PLEASE STOP*, I was standing in my bedroom, startled by how sexy Mother was trying to make me look. From skinny male to voluptuous woman, years of transforming my body bragged its final result in a red one-piece swimsuit.

The plump artificially perfected breasts that burdened my chest was sure to tease all leering eyes from within their deep v-shaped halter neck. My desperately tiny waist, coupled with my butt lift, gave the illusion of full round hips, which were on full skin display thanks to the v-line lower half of the suit.

When Saturday afternoon came around, Mother had already fled to Daniel's for the weekend. I sat alone in the living room and anxiously waited for Adam to arrive. Not wanting to use the public changing rooms, I changed into my swimsuit and flip-flops in advance.



I already lived by the beach. I didn't need to get dressed in front of everyone. Over my swimsuit, I wore my old school gym zip-up hoodie and shorts to cover myself from view.

Despite my best wishes, the heatwave arrived with a vengeance, making my second date with Adam all the more concrete. I had been hoping for a freak storm that would keep him from driving such a long distance. I even considered pretending to be sick, but a word of such a lie would surely reach Mother fast and then I'd be in huge trouble. It wasn't worth the risk. I was nowhere near as nervous in comparison to the previous weekend, but that didn't mean I wasn't uncomfortable; far from it.

When the doorbell chimed, I took a deep breath, as though anticipating a jump from a clifftop. I opened the door to find a dark silhouetted Adam blocking the sun.

"Hey Ellie, how you doing?" he said, handing me what appeared to be a bouquet of roses. "Sorry – I uh, I don't know why I felt the need to get you these. I dunno if you're a flower lover."

"Oh," I said, truly taken back, as I took the rich-scented bunch into my arms. Nobody had ever bought me flowers before. "T-Thank you, Adam. You really shouldn't have."

He really shouldn't have. Without thought, I walked back into the house, not sure why I did until I remembered I was looking for a vase. I was trying my best to remain calm when I realized I left Adam standing at the door like a fool.

"S-Sorry, come in, come in," I said, beckoning him

forth while I dashed from one needless destination to the next. I felt like my brain was malfunctioning.

“So how has your week been?” said Adam.

“Busy,” I bellowed from the kitchen. I filled up an empty glass vase in the sink before placing the roses on the windowsill, pausing for a moment to take them in. It felt strange getting flowers as a gift. “H-How about you?”

“No different from you,” said Adam. “I’ve been looking forward to this all week. I don’t get to the beach often being a – you know, a Havendell city boy and all.”

“This is my first time going too,” I said, as I rejoined him in the hallway.

“Really?” said Adam, genuinely surprised. “You live in paradise here and you have never walked across the road for a swim?”

“Well, for one thing, I can’t swim and –,”

“And what?”

“N-Nothing,” I said, blushing. I was about to tell him I had no friends, but I chose not to divulge such personal information. “Shall we go?”

For some reason, I had led myself to believe that we were going across the road to quietly bathe. But Adam insisted we go further down the shoreline closer to the town where there would be more people and “atmosphere”, whatever that meant.

Like the week before, Adam seemed to get excited

about the simplest of things. I wondered if he ever got out much. Pulling his truck into the car lot, I gulped down hard, as I looked upon the vast sea of people dotted all over the golden sand banks. Adam, on the other hand, appeared ecstatic. There were ice cream vans, burger huts, and vendors selling all manner of seaside fare. I was cautious of bumping into someone I knew.

We settled down somewhere halfway between the boardwalk and the tide. While Adam insisted on pitching the sun shelter and laying the towels onto the hot sand, I stood by and idly watched with no clue what to do with my hands. Was this how most women felt when men acted needlessly chivalrous?

The warm sea breeze blew hair into my mouth and obscured my vision, as I scanned the countless people all around me. Even though it was over thirty degrees, my knees trembled and shook like a leaf. The best I could hope for now was a shark attack.

Adam stripped down until he was in nothing but his black swimming boy shorts. I truly felt tiny and feminine in the shadow of his frame. I didn't know where to look. He had lots of body hair...and muscle, but not the kind a gym bro would obsess over sculpting in front of a mirror, rather; that old-fashioned stockiness gained from raw natural testosterone and years of hard physical labour. He sat down and reached into the cooler where he took out two glasses, a bottle of non-alcoholic wine and a cheeseboard.

"Want some?" he said, smiling, as though already knowing the answer.

I sat next to him – not too close – and took the glass.

The playful splash of the sauvignon blanc hitting the bottom of the glass compelled me to down it all with one mouthful, but I held back, remembering it couldn't get me drunk. "Thanks," I said, barely a whisper, before taking a sip.

"Sorry it's non-alcoholic," said Adam. "I gotta drive, you see."

"That's okay," I said sadly. "I understand."

We sat staring at the sea for a few moments, quietly sipping our wine, as we waited for something to happen. The sand was the most gentle hue of gold, almost earthen and muted, the humble star of the scene. Children ran around screaming and shouting after their friends while parents yelled at them to be careful near the water.

"That's a lovely sight," I mumbled to myself, feeling curiously tearful.

"Damn it's hot out," said Adam. "Are you not warm?"

Without thinking, I glared at Adam. Did he just indicate that I remove my clothes? But seeing his genuine, unabashed countenance told me was merely being inquisitive rather than perverted.

"Oh no, I didn't mean it like that!" said Adam. From his relaxed position, he sat up, panicked and red-faced. "I was just being – I was trying to be –,

"It's okay," I said, feeling a little bad for being so brusque. I believed him. "Sorry I – I'm just a little body conscious is all."

"You? Body-conscious?" said Adam in disbelief.

I knew he was about to shower me with undue compliments so I didn't respond. Staring ahead at the vast seascape, I considered the surreal nature of my predicament, and how I was going to proceed any further when I had these defensive walls surrounding me.

Mother's protection was fading. I could feel it. I wondered where she was going.

"You see that guy over there," said Adam, leaning forward to meet my eye level.

"Which guy?" I said, trying to see where exactly he was pointing. In the distance, I spotted an old obese man, ass-naked, and covered in scabs and scars. Squinting hard, I recognized the man to be Mr Mitchell, a patient I admitted to Mother not that long ago. "You mean him, Mr Mitchell?"

"Yeah him," said Adam, a smile breaking through his thin lips. "Do you think he's self-conscious?"

"Well, no," I said, bowing my head in shame. I didn't like how Adam was talking. I couldn't tell if he was trying to be helpful or if there was an implication behind his words. I wished only to change the subject.

"I'm sorry," said Adam after a few moments of silence. "I – I get nervous around women. When I get nervous I talk a lot and uh – actually forget I said anything. Otherwise, you're going to have to stop me from digging this hole and take the shovel from my hands!"

"Isn't that what you do best?"

Adam's furrowed brow deepened. "What do you mean

by that?" he said, puzzled until it clicked into place. "Ah yes, because I'm a landscaper!" he said, smiling. "Very good."

I wasn't sure where the terribly lame joke came from, but I really did have to stop Adam from eating his tail. From there, things got a little easier. We talked about dull things like work and stray observations on the beach, but it felt more relaxed after a short while.

After some time, a spark of courage compelled me to do the impossible. Perhaps it was an alcohol placebo, or most likely the intense heat, but I stood up and removed my shorts and hoodie, letting them fall around my feet. The scorching hot sun caressed my exposed skin in its warm embrace and I opened my eyes to find nothing had changed. Nobody was looking at me. Not even Adam.

I sat down on the towel with my knees pulled to my chest. I didn't know what I expected to happen when I revealed myself to the world – a sudden grope maybe, or perhaps ogling eyeballs, but now such ideas seemed far-fetched and shamefully egotistical. I felt bad for quickly judging Adam without thought. "I'm sorry for snapping at you earlier," I said, looking at him with sincerity. I didn't even catch him casting a glance at my cleavage. "I get nervous just like you."

He sat up on his hunkers, clearly relieved to be free of his dating anxieties. "You didn't snap," he said, barely able to hold eye contact for more than a second. "And when I was talking about your self-consciousness I was – I was trying to be supportive of your transition."

I wondered if I had heard him correctly. "I'm sorry, but did you just say 'your transition'?"

Adam blushed. “Well –,” he said, nervously rubbing the nape of his neck, “– well, yeah.”

I had no idea Adam knew about my past. It shocked me beyond belief. Feeling utterly lost, I scrambled around in my head, desperately trying to digest the information. Questions darted about faster than they formed. He used the term “transition”, did he know it was once forced upon me? Was this guy a creep? Should I deny the truth? Could I deny it? Was Mother aware he knew this? “I – I –,” I stammered, totally caught off guard.

“You seem surprised that I know this,” said Adam, looking at me strangely. “If I’m being too forward about it then by all means tell me to shut my mouth.”

“H-How did find out?”

“Find out?” said Adam, perplexed. “I always knew. Why else would you be at Dad’s clinic.”

“And you don’t care that I used to be – um –,”

“I wouldn’t have asked you out on a date if I did.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about all of this. “What else do you know?”

“I know that your old name was Brian. I know that you’re transgender. And I know you wanted my Dad to help you. That’s it.”

I didn’t know what to make of all this. It was incredibly surreal sitting next to a practical stranger who knew about my past. I felt stupid for not registering Adam’s knowledge of what I used to be. His father was a major catalyst of my transformation

for goodness sake. After many years of pretending that my old life never happened, I seemed to forget that other people weren't doing the same. "Sorry for snapping at you again," I said, forlornly.

"It's okay," said Adam. "Let's just forget about it and drink up."

"Sure thing."

We remained at the beach until sunset, lost in the rhythmic percussion of waves on sand. Adam's eyes were steady on the horizon, face aglow with the last orange rays before twilight beckoned the stars. His lips bore the semblance of a smile, just enough to show that he was enjoying his thoughts, whatever they may be. I stayed quiet, allowing him to stay lost in the moment until the time came to take me home.

Adam drove me back to the house in complete and utter silence. When we stopped outside the gate, I said goodbye, ready to hop out of the truck with not a second to lose. "Could you wait for a second," said Adam, nostrils flaring under a heavy sigh. "I want to talk to you about something."

Apprehensively, I withdrew my hand from the door handle and turned to face the music.

"Look, I need to know if this is going to work out between us."

Crickets filled the silence for a few painfully awkward moments. Palms clammy, heart thundering in my chest, I whittled down my panicked thoughts to two options. I could tell Adam the truth of how I had no desire to date him or any member of his sex for that matter. I could shower him with compliments of how



he was a genuinely nice man and that any woman would be lucky to have him.

But then there was Mother...

I could already see her disappointed face and it *pained* me.

The other option was to lie. I could assure Adam that everything was going fine between us and that I looked forward to spending more time with him in the future. This would surely be Mother's chosen option, which meant it was also mine. "I guess we'll have to see next time," I said, feeling control slip further out of my reach.

"Next time?" said Adam, a little perkier. He was trying to hide his smile, I could detect it from his pursing lips. "You mean you want to keep this going?"

Despite feeling otherwise, I reluctantly let the fateful word pass my lips. The word that always came after Mother's wishes. "Yes," I said, utterly dead inside.

## 7.

Mother's happiness was unquenchable. Normally this would make me feel equally happy, but not this time. I always managed to find the silver lining whenever I doubted her plans, regardless of how little it benefited me in the long run. I did this because I loved her more than I loved myself. Not only was she my Mother, but she was also my teacher, my best friend, my *God*. Only she could convince a man to become a woman, but I struggled to see the benefit of having a boyfriend. And that's what Adam became; *my* boyfriend.

We continued to date long after summer ended. I made

it very clear that I wasn't ready for physical intimacy. I didn't believe I could ever be truly ready, but he didn't know that. Regardless of my enforced maidenhood, Adam understood and respected my boundaries with what I assumed to be forbearance for the unavoidable.

With my anxieties on the back burner, I was choosing to live in deterrence until time eventually made it unbearable to live with. I dearly hoped something would change the course of my inescapable path, but I knew Mother all too well.

My escapade with Jess was the only time I'd ever been romantically intimate with someone...

Disregarding my total lack of intimate feelings for Adam, I did like him as a fellow human being. He really went out of his way to ensure that I was put at ease, even though personal comfort was often an impossible luxury in his presence. Being so feminine and girly around him made me nervous like I was purposely making myself magnetic to unwanted advances, but what could I do when Mother made me this way? More often than not, she was there to dress me like her doll.

The closest Adam ever got to me was a kiss on the cheek and some hand-holding. Even those small acts of closeness were difficult to familiarize myself with. I did it for Mother, but I also did it for Adam. My situation could have been a whole lot worse if I had been set up with someone far less patient and understanding – a tiny silver lining I clung to with every fibre of my being.

*I am Ellie. I am Ellie. I am Ellie.*

Adam seemed to enjoy my company even when I had

very little to contribute. He told me he had been with just one woman in his life. At the age of twenty-eight, he had spent most of his years alone, which probably explained why he was okay with going slow.

At times he let his stoic demeanour slip and I saw the boy in him. During one of our many movie dates, he cried like a baby while watching an emotionally charged scene between a fighting father and son. He never talked about his family so I wasn't sure what he thought of Daniel. The fact that his father was running an illegal underground medical facility didn't align with his pure and moral sensibilities. Sometimes I wondered if they were related at all.

I only witnessed Adam lose his temper once. We were on a dinner date, and even so, it was merely a minor snap after I corrected him on how to say 'Worcestershire sauce. He wouldn't stop apologizing and went overboard with trying to win my forgiveness, despite never losing it in the first place. He was a feeler rather than a thinker. He seemed insecure about his intelligence. Perhaps it was because his father was a doctor and he was a landscaper. Considering the shady nature of Daniel's medical work, I believed Adam should feel better for building an honest business for himself, but I could never say it to him.

Adam was also incredibly sensitive to my feelings and always said I could talk to him about anything. I believe he mistook my troubled mind for shyness, but at least he was considerate. A part of me wished that I could confide in him, but how could I? My reserved nature revolved around a complete lack of interest in him sexually, regardless of how nice he was.

Oh how I yearned for the context of our dates to be different. I would prefer it if we were just two friends

hanging out, but the unbearable sense of his chaste was always breathing down my neck. We were no different from any other warm-blooded mammals. Relationships traditionally included carnal needs...

Three months of dating Adam gradually took a toll on my conscience. The more I got to know him the guiltier I felt for leading him on. I wanted to hate him, but I couldn't even pretend to do that. I wanted to wake up one morning and realize I had fallen in love with him. Such a notion was restricted to the preposterous, but it would sure as hell make things a whole lot easier for everyone.

If I purposely sabotaged the relationship Mother would surely find out. She always did. I didn't want to defy her wishes. I only wanted Adam to recognize the man in me and walk away feeling disgusted. But the way he looked at me told me he only saw Ellie and nothing else. The man in me was long dead.

Gradually, I saw even less of Mother, which I didn't think was possible. She was spending every free moment with Daniel while Adam and I gallivanted from date to date. I could feel her hand slipping, which terrified me beyond description. I didn't know what to do to get her attention. Watching Daniel take her away from me at every opportune moment made my blood boil. Adam often joked that I was jealous, but that wasn't it. Definitely not. Why would I be jealous of Daniel hogging my Mother? It's ridiculous! Not a chance. She was my Mother, not my damned mistress!

In reality, I simply felt cast aside. Mother arranged for Adam and me to be together and then left me to deal with it. That's not to say I was losing faith in her – goodness no! Never! I just wanted her to fix my countless fears and anxieties as she fixed me in the

past. The longer Adam and I dated the more lecherous he was bound to become and the unavoidable closeness would be too much to bear. But I stayed with him because it was what Mother would want, right?

Despite the increasing pressures of my 'love life', I dutifully continued to work as Mother's secretary week in and week out. When I wasn't receiving tips on how to *please* Adam, I was being quizzed about the stages of our relationship. One day at work, while we were eating lunch together, Mother just up and asked out of nowhere, "Have either of you said 'I love you' yet?"

I nearly spat out my tea. That word. There was no use in lying so I told the truth. "N-No," I stammered, as a rush of anxiety reduced me to a quivering mess. "Why d-do you ask?"

I could tell Mother was concerned. She exhaled deeply through her nose, dabbing her lips with a napkin, which usually indicated she was annoyed, I think? She only had three bites of her chicken satsuma.

"No reason," she said in a most dispassionate tone.

As she stood up, my gaze followed. Panic was beginning to set in. I didn't want her to leave. She gave a brief smile before turning around to go back into her office. She seemed insincere, but – no, that cannot be.

The words impulsively ran away from my mouth before I could think. "You don't have to worry!" I blurted out, not entirely sure what I meant. "I promise you!"

Mother stopped and turned around. "Don't fret about it. I'm sorry I asked, darling," she said. "It's

absolutely none of my business. We each go at our own pace. It will happen naturally. And if not, well, I guess it wasn't meant to be." She then went into her office, closed the door, and didn't come out again until we finished that evening.

After that strange encounter, Mother's question refused to leave my mind. I could feel the tension building to an almighty crescendo. From that point onward, delusions plagued me whenever I was with Adam. Was he becoming impatient? Was I being unfair holding him off like this? Did that brief touch on my arm hint at a yearning for more? Am I a horrible person for doing this to him?

\*

One weekend, Mother's fantasy of a double date came true, and I had a terrible feeling that an announcement was going to be made. I had ideas of what it could be about, but I hoped that was all they were; ideas that wouldn't come to fruition. I comforted these premonitions by telling myself I was paranoid.

After all, I lived with the feeling constantly on a day-to-day basis. The occasion took place in the same restaurant Mother and I once dined in to celebrate the end of my first school semester. I yearned for that wonderful evening when it was just us, together and alone, Mother and Daughter.

Before leaving for the restaurant, I dressed alone. Normally, Mother would be there leafing through my closet in search of an appropriate outfit. She would hand me various articles of clothing to try on until she made her final judgment. At times, I believed her presence was unnecessary, but now that she wasn't there I realized I wanted her more than anything.

I stepped into a white lace skirt with subtle pleats that gave it an a-line shape. The hem stopped right above my knee; respectable, dignified – just as Mother liked.

The top I picked was a tall maroon garment with a turtleneck and puffed organza sleeves patterned in polka dots. Of course, the high heels matched the top and were of a single platform with an ankle strap. I even did my hair up in a high doughnut bun to emulate the style Mother enjoyed so dearly.

When I went into Mother's bedroom to ask her opinion, she barely looked at me. "Wow, you look beautiful as always, darling," she said, too immersed in her reflection. She only cared how she looked for Daniel and nothing else. I felt like bursting into tears right there in front of her.

At the restaurant, I felt a little better.

While we conversed about our lives and drank with full stomachs, I noticed Adam was attempting to emulate his father who was a little drunk and clearly very horny. I could see Daniel's arm moving back and forth, caressing Mother's thigh from beneath the table.

The sight of it sickened me. He had no right to touch my Mother. And for a moment, I believed Adam had no right to touch me either. That is until I reminded myself it had been over three months since we started dating. He had earned it, and a whole more than I was capable of giving. The guilt continued to gnaw at me.

*Why must I have a boyfriend?*

Mother silenced the table with a single clink of her fork to glass, and I knew in that instant that my suspicions were solidifying into reality. Something was

up. "This has been a lovely evening," she said, utterly bursting with joy.

"Hear, hear!" Daniel added, bullishly pounding his fist on the tabletop.

"I can't tell you how wonderful it is to be in the company of this adorable young couple before us," said Mother, to which Daniel gruffed in agreement. "It warms my heart to know that love is not exclusive to the young. I never imagined that at the age of forty-three I would find it again and yet here we all are. A new family."

Adam gave a gentle squeeze of my knee, sending unnerving shivers down my spine. Through my periphery I could see he kept looking at me, desperately trying to meet my eyes. Reluctantly, I turned to meet his gaze and put all my strength into my facial muscles to form a smile. I was too focused on the word 'family' that Mother used. *Oh no*, I thought. *Were they getting married?!*

"Adam, Ellie, we have some very important news for you," said Daniel, steamed and glassy-eyed.

"..."

"A miracle has happened," said Mother, pensively holding back her glee. "I'm pregnant!"

"..."

"..."

*No! No! No! No! No!*

Did I hear that correctly or had I just walked in on a



nightmare? I was already sitting still, but I felt like every nerve in me froze. My extremities suddenly had a mind of their own. Chaos spread throughout my body. I was sweating. My breath was shallow. I was having a panic attack.

*I'm pregnant...*

My body slipped out of the chair and pressed itself into a tight ball beneath the table. And I was rocking, muttering to myself, overtaken by pure terror. I squeezed my arms around my legs, making an even tighter ball.

Then slowly, very slowly, I felt something that surprised me. I was calming down. I was separating from the terror. I was moving past terror into quiet resolution. I rose and walked around the table to where Mother and Daniel sat.

*I'm pregnant...*

I was on another plane. The intense fear pulsating through me had broken and given way to an eerie stillness. I was controlled and determined. I picked up the steak knife beside Daniel's plate, adjusting the grip while I circled around his chair. It seemed pleading words were coming out of Mother's mouth, but it just sounded like a cacophony of noise and gibberish.

*I'm pregnant...*

Glancing into the distance I saw restaurant personnel rushing towards the table. Looking upon Mother, face pale and eyes bulged in terror, I grabbed her by the hair. She was screaming yet somehow I couldn't hear her. Standing behind her, I pulled back her head and brought the blade to her throat.

A mysterious fury rippled throughout me and gave me superhuman strength. I pulled the blade across her throat; its bite was red and cold. Blood spewed everywhere. The noises stopped. I remained calm. I was released from the pain. I wasn't glad or relieved or filled with satisfaction. I felt nothing. I let go of Mother and her head slumped backwards, the light in her eyes fading while she gurgled and coughed up pools of deep red.

Dead.

I stood still, eyes closed, as I took in the sweet silence in my head for the first time in years. Then I heard a faint cry...a jovial cry of happiness. I couldn't tell where it was coming from. My eyes flashed open. My breathing was rapid and shallow while my left hand trembled in the latch of another, larger hand. It was only then that I realized I was still sitting in my chair. No blood-soaked table. No dead Mother slumped in her chair.

It didn't happen.

Oh, thank heavens! It was a dream – but it wasn't, it couldn't have been. I wasn't sleeping; I was more awake than ever, and feeling every particle of rage and dread. How then could I explain what I had seen? What I had done? Daniel and Mother were still in front of me, arm-in-arm while Adam meekly congratulated them both. Something was different. Something had changed. And it wasn't just me.

My time as Mother's daughter was surely over now.

## 8.

Those two fateful words refused to leave me through

to the following weekend.

*I'm pregnant.*

While Daniel came to Hazelbrook to spend time with Mother, I was whisked away in Adam's truck to see his home for the first time in Havendell City. Years had passed since I saw the towering skyscrapers of a metropolis, but all enthusiasm was lost on me due to the crushing news of Mother's pregnancy.

I couldn't focus on the fact I was about to spend a weekend alone with a *man*. That was one too many worries for me to think about.

The crosswind rocked the truck to no avail. We were going forward and nothing but a blessed tragedy could change that. The tyres made their monotonous hiss over the rain-washed highway. I watched how the yellowed light played in the droplets, showing this deluge in apparently solitary drops.

The two words repeated in my mind once more and I squeezed my eyes shut in the naive hope of erasing them. But how could I? I had failed Mother. I was supposed to be her junior, her shadow, her daughter, but clearly, I wasn't good enough to fill the role. Why else would she get pregnant after everything we went through?

If only I accepted my transformation from the beginning then maybe she wouldn't have grown tired of me. If only I had been a good student at school, we would still be alone, together. If only I hadn't messed around with girls then perhaps she wouldn't have been so disappointed in me.

I couldn't believe I wanted to kill her. The guilt I felt

for having such murderous thoughts tormented me more than the fact that I was being replaced by a true-born child. I could never forgive myself for that. Perhaps spending the weekend away from Mother would clear my head, but my yearning to be close to her at all times was at odds with my desire to stay sane.

Adam turned on the indicator and took the exit that read, 'Havendell - 86 miles'. "Not much longer now, Ellie," he said, pausing for a moment before adding, "You alright there? You seem quieter than usual."

"I'm just tired," I said. I faked a yawn in the hope of dropping a hint. "It's been a long week."

"Yeah, I'm pretty beat too."

Onto yet another endless highway we spun, pushing through the increasingly heavy rain that thundered against the windscreen in infinite daggers. The downpour was incredibly treacherous for October.

I slipped into the fantasy that comforted me since I learned of Mother's pregnancy. If I could be granted one wish, I would request to have always been Mother's natural-born daughter. I never would have grown up without a mother. I never would have cut corners and fallen in with wasters and lowlifes. I never would have inadvertently caused a girl to die horribly.

I never would have been Brian.

This was all his fault. For some time I believed he was gone for good, as I had grown accustomed to my new role in life and accepted adversity. Evidently, he never left. He was the one who constantly held me back and wouldn't let me become Ellie. If he wasn't there at the

back of my mind, constantly whispering grievances then I'd be the woman I was meant to be.

I *hated* Brian...

Throughout the week, I found my gaze constantly drawn to Mother's stomach. The bump was barely visible, as she was just nearing the end of her first trimester, but knowing that a fetus lived inside her deeply troubled me. The hatred I felt towards the unborn child eclipsed my feelings for Brian.

After three miscarriages, Mother was attempting a fourth pregnancy at the age of forty-three. She would be forty-four giving birth. There was a high risk of losing the child while carrying at such an age.

The child threatened everything Mother and I had built together. Surely once it was born I would be forgotten and cast aside like an old unwanted doll. I didn't want to believe it, but I was keenly aware that the process had already started. I wanted the baby to die...

After a long drive, we finally arrived in the suburbs of Havendell. I was abruptly awoken by my limping head.

I rubbed my bleary eyes to find that the clock read midnight. In the beam of headlights, I caught a quick glimpse of Adam's home—cube-shaped with its front door dead centre, four large windows near each corner and constructed of earthen red brick. It was exactly how I imagined Adam's home; straightforward and classic.

Slowly edging into the garage, the truck finally came to a halt, the engine ticking into silence.

"Oh boy, these long drives are killing me," said Adam,

unbuckling his belt. "You'll have to get yourself a driving license someday."

"Somehow I don't think that will be possible.

The house was surprisingly clean and well-kept for a man who drudged in mud every day. The floors beneath my feet were an old-fashioned parquet with blends of deep homely browns. The walls I passed by were the greens of summer gardens meeting a bold white baseboard. No photographs hung on the walls, only faux paintings one would find in a home department store.

A dreadful thought passed through my mind – that this would be my home one day...

While I awkwardly stood in the hallway waiting for Adam to return with my suitcase, I looked up the stairs at the landing. It was so dark up there, it scared me. I put my hand on the bannister; a twirl of a branch tamed by what was most likely Adam's skilled hand, its grain flowing as water might.

Adam returned with my suitcase in hand. He carried it with ease, shaming my weakened arms. "Follow me," he said, climbing up the stairs.

Fatigue no longer dulled my senses and I switched back to high alert. I had no idea what his expectations were. Was I to sleep in his bed or my own? I didn't remember communicating such a scenario when I expressed that I wasn't ready for intimacy. He led me to an empty spare room with a single bed and placed my suitcase at the footer before turning back.

"Right," he sighed, unsure of where to put his hands. "Well, I guess I'll see you in the morning."

“Thank you, Adam,” I said, looking around the bare room. “And t-thanks for driving me here.”

“Ellie, please, I wasn’t being serious about the long drive. I do it because I want to.”

Adam then closed the door behind him, his heavy boots plonking down the hallway before vanishing with the creak of his bedroom door. He wasn’t kidding about being tired. I felt a calm wash over me. I was safe for now.

I unpacked my suitcase, kicked off my black stilettos, and undressed. I removed my grey boat-necked sweater, unbuttoned the crisp starch white blouse, and unclasped my bra. I closed my eyes and basked in the feeling of pure release, firmly hugging my breasts while my fingers gently massaged the deep red marks left on my skin by the straps. An age had passed since I got dressed for work that morning.

I unzipped my black tube skirt and wiggled my hips until it crumpled around my ankles. After unrolling the sheer black tights off my legs, I then put on my satin rose-gold pyjama set of a cap-sleeved button-up top and short shorts. Climbing under the quilt, I suddenly remembered to remove my hair ties; hair tumbling down around my face and shoulders.

I lay there for a few moments until twilight sunk me into the pillow...

It appeared I was walking down a hallway, completely unclothed. I couldn’t see them, but I felt hundreds of spectators looking at me, scrutinizing every part of my body like I was part of a Victorian freak show. I couldn’t stand up properly. My legs were too weak to carry my weight.

A voice called out to me in an ethereal wind. "Ellie," hailed the voice. "Where are you, darling?" It was Mother. She needed me. I found the strength to stand and I knew exactly where to go. This was my house after all. I opened one of the doors. Nothing. A lump in my throat threatened to make me cry, but I persisted. I opened another door. Nothing there either.

"Where are you? Mother, please!" I shouted impatiently.

A scream attacked me right in the heart; a baby's scream and I'm pulled out of the depths of my nightmare into the waking world. Relief instantly washes over me like a soothing salve. It was just a nightmare.

Rolling over beneath the covers, I waited for sleep to take me once again, but after several tosses and turns, I couldn't empty my mind. Thinking about it more made it worse and after an hour or so of restlessness, I yearned only for the warmth of Mother's body next to mine.

That was when an odd idea popped into my head. Would it be so bad to stay in the same bed as Adam? I thought about the disenchanted look on his face when he left me the room. He was clearly trying very hard to mask his disappointment, but his gentlemanly manner could only force him to be respectful of the deal. There would be absolutely no major intimacy until I was comfortable.

But all we would be doing is sleeping together, not – well, you know, *canoodling*. I had to show him progress and that I was taking steps in the right direction, even if the final destination scared me beyond belief. Being alone after a nightmare was bad enough in my own



house. It was far worse in a new environment. The room felt so bare.

I threw the blankets off me and tiptoed out into the hallway, my heart racing like I was a trespassing burglar. Down the end of the hallway, I saw a dim light through the crack of a door. Assuming it was the correct room, I looked inside, cringing while the door creaked open.

There was Adam, quietly snoring with blankets barely covering his hairy body. A voice in my head asked me what the hell I was doing. I silenced it in favour of the childish part of me that desperately needed another human nearby. Stealthily gliding to the bedside, I glanced at the snoozing gorilla-man and wondered if doing this was a good idea. My heart seemed to be racing faster than ever. Why was he sleeping with the light on? Perhaps he left it on by accident. Would he think me weird for getting into bed with him without permission?

*Come on, Ellie, I thought, you ARE his girlfriend!*

The thought of referring to myself as someone's girlfriend still felt outlandish, but despite my reservations, I didn't want to be alone. Climbing under the blankets, I was instantly made aware of the significant dip in the middle of the bed due to Adam's weight and size. I turned inward to prevent myself from rolling onto him, cursing the enormity of my breasts, as they wouldn't allow me to sleep on my stomach. Curiously, it didn't take me long to drift towards slumber, but briefly, I was awoken from a twilight state of mind by the weight of an arm wrapping itself around me.

And I didn't protest.

*Duh-duhn, duh-duhn, duh-duhn...*

A beating heart echoed inside my ear, gradually growing louder, as I regained consciousness. I could feel deep heavy breaths rush through the hairs on my head, like wind through a meadow. Through the mists of the heavy sleep, I assumed I was with Mother, but this chest was rock solid. Slowly I opened my eyes and looked across a field of hair that rose and fell with each breath.

Realizing I was with Adam, every particle of my body seemed to clench, but I didn't move for fear of waking him. I must have rolled onto him in my sleep. Suddenly, his heavy breathing ceased and he began to smack his lips. He sensed me waking up. I removed my head from his chest and sat upright to try and hide my scarlet red cheeks.

"Morning," he grunted, stretching out his legs in a deep exhale.

"Morning," I repeated, wondering if it would be rude to just up and leave the room. I didn't want to draw attention to the awkward situation. "Did you – did you sleep well?"

"Like a log," said Adam. He sat up, wiped the sleep from his eyes, and looked around the room like a cloudy-eyed toddler who had just woken up from a nap. He announced that he needed a shower and waddled to the en-suite while apishly scratching his ass. "If you want to take one, the big bathroom is just down the hall."

I sat in bed feeling incredibly grateful for Adam's

nonchalance. Sometimes it annoyed me how considerate he was. He knew well I would be terribly embarrassed if he commented on me sleeping with him. The clock read 11:11 a.m. I couldn't remember the last time I slept in that late. "Weird."

I showered, dried myself, and then ironed my hair until it was straight as an arrow. Looking at my outfit laid upon on the bed, it once again dawned on me that I made all the clothes choices alone.

At that thought I instantly started to get dressed, hoping the basic task would distract my thoughts from veering towards Mother and her wretch of a baby.

I pulled up a pair of sheer salmon-pink knickers, embroidered with black mesh trim around the line. The sheer was vaguely transparent bar a darker patch that covered my – you know. After that came the infamous matching bra with floral mesh to cover my nipples. Sighing in preparation for the day's battle armour, I scooped my breasts into their respective cups and fastened the clasps with an unusual degree of difficulty.

Since the barelegged season was over, I stepped into a pair of sheer black tights, and rolled each leg up over my hips, adjusting the waistband whilst wriggling my toes. Out of all the various clothing items I wore, tights had become my guilty pleasure. Next, I put on a white camisole before bringing a green tartan tennis skirt up over the hips, tucking the top inside the band. Then came the black long-sleeved polo neck top that made no secret of showing the conspicuous outline of my shapely torso. Finally, a pair of black oxford brogues with a one-inch sole and slight heel.

I was ready for the unknown.

After a hearty breakfast, Adam decided he should take me into town. We had no particular plan other than wander about and see where the day took us. Wrapping up was vital, as temperatures dipped dramatically overnight and fog consumed the city. I put on my black peacoat that lengthened down an inch above the hem of my skirt and then we got the train into town.

As the train cornered the track, the raucous, metallic shriek of the decrepit carriages made me cringe. I looked out the window, disappointed that the famously green city was veiled by a vast blanket of white. The fog suffocated every building and tree, swallowing every distant object in a whitened haze. It was rather dreamlike actually.

In town we aimlessly walked the streets, looking at window displays whilst trying to come up with ideas on what to do for the day. Adam kept trying to buy me things, but I refused him every time. I was only looking at window displays to kill the time, forget about my problems, and act like a normal woman.

At one point, Adam linked his hand with mine, and strangely, I didn't mind. I was aware he had been testing the waters for some time. He was becoming more confident being around me.

"Can you think of anything you'd like to do?" said Adam, as we strolled through the park. "The entire city is yours for the taking."

"I wouldn't mind a drink actually."

"Great, I know a nice little cafe nearby -,"

"Actually I was thinking of something stronger."

“Ellie, it’s only two o’clock.”

“Alcohol doesn’t know the time of day.”

“I – I guess not,” said Adam, scratching the nape of his neck. “A bar it is then.”

We went to a nice-looking place called DeBurgos. The bar was filled with professionals and hundreds of conversations told in loud voices, all of them competing with the lounge music that dominated the atmosphere.

Adam wound his way through the crevices between bodies, holding onto our drinks for his dear life to ensure he didn’t spill them. Both of us had pints of lager. After drinking one pint, I realized my stomach couldn’t handle it so I switched over to gin and tonic to quell my fledgling wager.

“So I’ve been meaning to ask you,” said Adam, after returning with the second round. “What are your thoughts on the big news?”

I opened the tonic bottle, poured it into the gin, and paused for a moment to consider my words. “The news from last week’s dinner?” I said, repressing the urge to flip the table and scream. I really didn’t want to talk about it. “Nothing much. Why?”

“Just wondering is all,” said Adam. He looked away and sipped his pint. I could tell there was a lot more that he wanted to say. He began biting his nails, which I had noted as his signal for a troubled mind.

“Well, what do you think?”

Adam looked back at me, clearly glad that I asked him.

“Shocked, to be honest,” he said, sighing. “I never imagined that I’d have my first sibling at the age of twenty-nine.”

“Well, I never imagined that I’d have a new sibling at the age of twenty-seven.”

Adam looked at me like I had two heads. “You mean twenty, right?”

“Y-Yeah,” I said, feeling my cheeks heat up with rosiness. “That last drink must have gone straight to my head!”

“Anyway, Faye seemed very happy.”

“She did.”

We drank quietly for a while. Once again I was under the impression that Adam wasn’t too fond of his father. After the third drink, I struck up the courage to ask him about it. “You seem concerned about your Dad having a child,” I said, angling for mutual understanding.

Adam gave a weary sigh. “A little worried, yes,” he said, briefly meeting my gaze before looking into the distance. “He’s fifty-eight. He should be thinking about retirement and -,”

“...and?”

“Well if he wasn’t attentive when I was a kid who is to say anything will change for the new one.”

“He seemed happy when they told us.”

“He was drunk. More drunk than any of us could

know. He's very good at hiding it."

"I see."

After that, I had no idea what to say. I could tell something long-repressed was eating Adam up inside. I wanted to help him but I didn't know how. All I felt was a vague connection linking us together for the first time. Compelled to do the unexpected, I placed my hand on his in solidarity. His face lit up like a jack-o-lantern, clearly touched to receive my support.

We continued to drink throughout the day, hopping from bar to bar, and consuming drink after drink. Intoxication took hold of my senses. I spoke louder while trying to keep my head on swivel. In fact, I was talking a lot more in general.

We played a game of assigning stories to fellow bar patrons based on their appearances. Adam wasn't very imaginative but he laughed at my assessments. I managed to let my feminine grace and respectability slip a couple of times. Adam, clearly not used to drinking, tried his best to subtly avert his gaze after I returned from the girls' room and sat with my legs spread apart. Mortified, I made a note to control myself.

The more Adam drank, the looser he became. It was nice to see him merry; squinting through dimples with a big dumb grin. He didn't refrain from eye contact quite as much, as the alcohol appeared to fuel him with confidence.

He placed his hand on my thigh, which was basically his signature act of affection at this point – and sensually stroked me back and forth. I suggested we leave. I didn't want to know what he was like with his

judgment impaired. I was certain it would be fine, but I didn't dare to take a chance.

"Ah no, Ellie!" Adam bemoaned. "Come on, one more drink!"

"Okay fine," I said. I was beginning to feel nervous. "Just – just one more then."

"That's the spirit!" said Adam, clumsily jumping to his feet. "I'll be right back!"

Alone in the shadowy, enclosed booth, I rested my head back on the upholstery and released a trapped sigh from my chest. Through my dulled, intoxicated senses, I found a quiet fear simmering beneath the gregarious nature of the evening. was a bad idea to go drinking.

*Your transition was pointless if Mother could get pregnant all along,* a voice in my head whispered.

Eyes squeezed shut, I crushed the voice and sent it back into the depths of my subconscious, rattling my fist in anger for allowing such a thought to cross my mind.

"It wasn't pointless!" I said through gritted teeth.

"Can you tell me something? Have you actualized fully, darling?"

I looked next to me to find Mother sitting in the space Adam had just left behind. She was dressed in a red lace cheongsam dress with elbow-length sleeves and an above-knee hemline. Her hair hung down her face like two gorgeous dark curtains; velvety soft with a sheen that I envied.



She looked...incredible.

"Mother, what are you doing here?!"

"Have you actualized? Fully?"

"W-What do you mean by that?"

"Don't you understand the difference between thinking and being?"

"I don't – pardon?"

"To *be* is to simply exist. To *think* is to find nothing but claptrap and contradictions. I'm afraid you cannot do both, darling."

"S-So what you're saying is don't think about the person I want to be – just be that person?"

"Ellie?"

"Yes?"

"Ellie?"

"Yes, what is it, Mother?"

"Who are you talking to?"

A hand was touching my shoulder. Looking up, I found Adam observing me with a disturbed, concerned look on his face. "N-Nobody," I said, heat spreading through my veins.

"Maybe you're right, we should just go home, and –"

"No, no!" I said, urging him to take his seat. "I'm fine

I – I just got caught up in my thoughts is all!”

Adam didn't look wholly convinced. Slowly, apprehensively, he sat next to me, peering suspiciously through his periphery while he sipped his drink. I took my gin and tonic and took a large mouthful. I was going to need it...

## 10.

Night fell upon us and we made the decision to go home. We both staggered into a taxi and we were on our way. The fresh air further intoxicated me. I felt vaguely ill, as the driver swerved sharply around the downtown corners.

“Do you mind – *hic!* – t-taking it easy, friend,” Adam slurred through drunken hiccups. “I'm sure you don't want v-vomit – *hic!* – all over your car seat.”

The driver flashed a look in the rear-view mirror that said *don't you dare* and slowed down without saying a word. I felt better once we entered the highway. The low rumble of the car was soothing. A part of me wanted to continue drinking, but reason told me it wasn't a good idea.

The minute we arrived at the house, Adam brought me to the kitchen and poured me a large glass of water. “Thanks,” I said, before taking a massive gulp.

“Don't drink so fast or reflex will bring it all up,” said Adam.

Leaning against the kitchen island, I nursed my glass, trying everything I could to disassociate from the peculiar atmosphere consuming the room. Adam wasn't merely looking at me with concern anymore.

He wasleering. "What?" I said impatiently.

"N-Nothing," said Adam, blushing.

"No, what is it?"

"Nothing!" said Adam defensively. "It's just – I – well, uh, here we are!"

"Yes," I said. "Here we are."

Like a fortress battening down the hatches, my relaxed state clenched into defence mode. All night long I tried to dismiss the steady increase in venereal tension, disbelieving it could drown me.

And yet here I was receiving the complete attention of a titillated man...alone. His eyes were fixed on me and only me. I was the only thing in his world. Being under such intense focus opened up every vulnerability like an old wound. I felt small and helpless. His shadow consumed mine as he loomed over me. I could see only his chest. I was paralyzed and couldn't look up at him. Surely he knew I was uncomfortable. He placed his hands on my arms. "You're trembling," he said softly.

"Am I?" I said. I looked up to meet his eyes. He was giving me that look. I immediately turned away. "S-Sorry."

Adam huffed a laugh through his nose and dipped his head in contemplation "Ellie, I-I kind of want to kiss you," he said, hand turning my face to meet his eyes.

My heart leapt up my throat, as the long state of carnal affairs took full shape. I looked at every part of the room that wasn't swallowed by Adam's confining

closeness. The outline of his hardened manhood, straining against his jeans, begging to be freed, was overwhelmingly intimidating. I had no idea what would happen if I met his eyes again. I didn't want to know. As long as I didn't look then nothing could happen, right?

"Hey, don't worry about it," said Adam tenderly. He pulled me closer and wrapped his arms around me. His embrace was warm, and his big, strong arms felt strangely protective, yet my rigidity didn't abate for one second. "I'm sorry," he said, loosening his embrace. He sensed my discomfort. "Just promise you'll let me know when your ready, okay?"

For a moment I felt grateful for having avoided intimacy once again, but then I remembered what Mother said in the bar. I broke away and looked up at the towering specimen before me. It was clear he was masking his hurt through a forlorn smile. I had to rectify it. I had to actualize.

"What is it?" said Adam perplexed.

I found the will to look deep into his eyes. He seemed to know right away. He took my hand into his and nervously swallowed down a lump in his throat. "S- Shall we go to my room?" he said.

We were both afraid. "Y-Yes," I squeaked, barely a whisper.

Was this really happening?

Adam guided me out of the kitchen by the hand. Through the shadows of the hallway, I looked ahead at my escort, my admirer, my boyfriend. My outfit seemed to shrink by the second, as intense heat spread

throughout my body. At the top of the stairs, the dark landing made me feel like I was crossing over to another realm; a place filled with primal nakedness and inexorable fear.

On the other side, I was inside Adam's dimly lit bedroom, shoes removed while I stood idly by his bed. My mind was racing faster than ever, as a thin layer of sweat covered my skin. It was plain that Mother was prepping me for this all along, as I recalled the affirmation she amorously gave to me not that long ago. Imagine feeling the warmth and security of his arms around you, Mother whispered. Nobody can ever harm you this way.

After closing the door, Adam turned around with ferocity in his step. Fear hooked my stomach. He clasped my face into his hands, pausing for a beat to look deep into my eyes that must have screamed terror. But he didn't stop. He bent down, his lips against my cheek, brushing it lightly – and still, that light touch sent restless shivers through my nerves; shivers that made my whole body seize. "If you want me to stop, tell me now," he whispered. When I still said nothing, he brushed his mouth against the hollow of my temple. "Or now." He traced the line of my cheekbone. "Or now." His lips were against mine.

"Or—"

He was kissing me. Once, twice, until I've had the taste of beer, and the pungent waft of aftershave from his neck. He was everywhere up my back and over my arms. Suddenly he was kissing me harder, deeper, with an impassioned, urgent need that shocked me. Breathing heavily like a fired-up bull, his hands slithered down my waist, lifting my polo neck top and the camisole up and over my head. He discarded the

garb on the floor and steered me by the hips towards the bed with an assault of kisses.

Lying on my back, quivering and panting, I see only the demoralizing silhouette of Adam behind the dim lamplight, as he pulled his shirt off over his head. In one deft move, he climbed on top of me, gazing lovingly into my eyes, as his arms tensed on either side of my head. I felt a hot breath on my neck, then the tender brush of lips, burning as they made contact with my neck. A hand runs through my hair, as he nibbled and sucked on my neck, sending deeply unfavourable tremors throughout my body.

Pinned down and helpless, I was a little breathless beneath his bulk. I could feel him grinding his rock-hard erection against my thigh while his free hand signalled my back to arch upward. An excruciatingly long time is spent twiddling with the clasps of my bra. "Sorry," he repeats with breathless sincerity.

When he was successful, he resumed kissing me, my neck, and my breasts that poured out of my bra like two water balloons. I suppressed the urge to cover them, wholly weakened by his domineering touch, as he peeled each article of clothing from my body like gift wrap. I closed my eyes, not for pleasure, but to naively remove myself from feelings of intense vulnerability.

While Adam nibbled on my earlobe, he stopped for a beat. "Take off your skirt...", he said breathlessly. He withdrew his weight from me and began unbuckling his pants. Utterly stupefied, I feared a moment's hesitancy more than the act I was about to perform. Yet I sat up, unzipped my tartan skirt and threw it to the floor. I glanced at the door. It may not be too late to run, but my decision was to keep up appearances,

not to let Adam down, humiliate myself, or draw attention to the poor choice he made among the countless other women he could have had.

When I turned around, Adam was already undressed down to his boxers. On my back again he resumed kissing me, biting my lower lip in between quick passionate breaths. His tongue circles my lips before worming its way into my mouth like a muscular eel. I had no idea what to do but to just lie there and let his wet and slippery tongue wrestle with mine. When he pulled it out, fondling my breasts, repeatedly biting my neck, I fought another urge to wipe his thick saliva from around my lips. He paused for a moment to look deep into my eyes and I knew the time was near.

I crossed the previously established marker of my sexual experience into the unknown. I was going to get through this. I had to get through this. I will get through this. I would never let him know what a struggle it was, what it cost me, to appear calm and receiving of his overbearing lust. I was without any other desire but to please him and get the night done.

My panic and disgust were under control until his passionate kissing crossed over into tempestuous territory. A bolt from the blue, he tore the tights from my legs, panting like a wild boar out of control. No longer was he the Adam I thought I knew. Intense fear rushed through my veins but I didn't dare show it on my face. If he only knew how scared I was when he pulled my knickers down my legs, I'm sure he would've stopped. At least I trusted he would. It takes every ounce of my will to keep my legs spread, as I fought the powerful urge to clamp them shut and protect myself.

Hanging back for a moment to take in my naked form,

he shuddered with arousal and began to remove his boxers. Shame washed over me, boiling every particle of my exposed flesh, reminding me that it was nearing the cut-off point. When I saw the enormous size of his erect phallus, a sense of despair came over me, as I felt vaguely mocked for what I now had between my thighs.

“You’re making me burst, Ellie,” Adam gasped, as he lay on top of me, nose brushing against mine. He gave me a light kiss on the lips and then reached down to grab his organ. It took every ounce of my strength to not look away from his piercing gaze, as his penis pressed against my labia. He cannot know I didn’t want this. He can’t ever know.

You are safe with him, Mother whispered. You are safe in his arms.

He drove his member in a little too firmly. I flinched in pain. “Sorry!” he said breathlessly. I wasn’t wet enough, but that didn’t stop him. He tried again, slowly and carefully this time, as he eased it in the more I lubricated. This must be what hell felt like. His head rose above mine, as his phallus ground its way into me, expanding in size the further it slithered in. I bite into his ab to subsist the pain; and then, without will or conscious control, my entire body fluttered, breath quivering, as the head pressed against the hatefully pleasurable endpoint. He pulled back and then pressed in a little faster, increasing the intensity with each powerful thrust.

I was panting...heavily. The pain did not abate. Each time I opened my eyes for a second, I saw only Adam’s hairy chest. He was far too tall to be face-to-face, as his stalk buried itself deep inside me. A strange sweat-like glow coated my skin the longer and harder



he thrust. The pain subsided and gradually blossomed into fluctuating pleasure. Heaving into my ear, he interspersed each electrifying propel with kisses on my temple, running his other hand through my hair. The zone where our organs met was now slippery and wet. Powerful feelings of defilement chipped away my deep-rooted humiliation, revealing the stark, shameful feelings of pleasure underneath. I went away to another place to escape from the hellish occurrence of venereal experience.

He hammered deep into me until my head reached the headboard. Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! My entire body responded to each powerful thrust in satisfaction, taunted by the ridiculously pleasurable sensation, but it wasn't enough to pull me back into the moment. My body twisted and contorted in pulsating spasms, craving only for an inevitable release to end it all. I was pulled back into the moment against my will.

My hands made their way up and down his sweaty back, trembling, as I dug my nails into his flesh. Every nerve in my body and brain was electrified. I gnawed his left pectoral to endure the chastened pleasure; the pleasure that was equally traumatic. I felt like a swelling balloon, ready to explode any second, as he drove his phallus in deeper, faster, and harder. The entirety of his body was now pressed against mine, soaked in sweat and steaming hot. All of the shame and fear disappeared for all but a singular moment until his breath quivered and I knew he was already done.

"Oh god," he gasped repeatedly, giving one last deep thrust; his moans growing louder and strained. I could feel his penis pulsing and contracting inside me. He gave another big push, loudly gasping out, as a slight warmth gathered inside me. He collapsed into my

shoulder, panting and heaving, as though he had just finished a marathon. “T-Thank you,” he gasped.

Bosom heaving up and down, I opened my eyes and gazed up at the ceiling with no clue what to say or do. A piercing ring filled my ears. Time seemed to run slowly in my head, but now that Adam had his way with me, I didn’t expect it to be over so soon.

Adam lifted himself up, utterly short-winded, and locked eyes with mine. “Did you –,”

“– yes,” I lied.

“Oh good,” said Adam. He sighed in relief. His pride would falsely remain intact. He pressed his lips against mine and sensually kissed me for a few moments before rolling over onto his side of the bed. His chest continued to rise and fall, as he caught up with his breath. He gathered me into his arms, stroking his fingers through my hair, as we lay silent for a few minutes.

“My god,” Adam gasped. “I think I’m in love.”

# PART IV

## 1.

Opening my bleary eyes, I found that Adam was absent. Beneath the soft, quilted blankets I rolled into the centre of the bed and stretched out my creaky limbs to the point of retraction. Dust particles aimlessly floated in the rays of golden sunshine beaming through the curtain fissure. The clock displayed 07:24 in large, red digital numerals. Adam had been gone for some time.

Fragments of the dream I just had came back to me. I was biting into Adam's pectoral muscle, experiencing what could only be described as a contradiction of bliss and indignity. Then there was the sensual nibbling on my neck, the thick, sweaty heaving, the sensation of being filled, and – *Huh*, I thought, *that wasn't a dream. Didn't that happen before?*

I sat upright in the bed, cracked my shoulders and tousled my – wait – black hair? For a split second, I'm alarmed by what I see running through my expertly manicured red nails. Below that was exposed cleavage in a black satin night dress that I didn't recall possessing, or even putting on the prior night.

Confused and panicked, the immediate Christmas recurred in the album of my memory; switching on each flickering light in my brain like a tired old factory of hardship. Mother had gifted the nightwear to me. I dyed my hair black shortly after I moved in with Adam. I hadn't lost the run of myself yet.

That must have been two months – no, five months ago! Or was it a year? No that couldn't be. Mother was still pregnant. It was hard to keep track of time. My heart slowed its violent, thumping pace, as calm eased me into a state of deep resonance.

I climbed out of bed and tactically moved around the clothes carelessly thrown on the rug. Panties were absent from beneath my skimpy nightdress; the sight of them discarded on the floor tingled the junction of my thighs, as a scar would when one recalls the tale of its origin. The dream dissolved into obscurity. It hurt my head trying to recall the details.

I stared at my reflection in the mirror, as I furiously brushed my teeth. Spitting into the sink, I looked up again to meet her eyes. The woman staring back at me vaguely looked like Mother with her black hair unfurled over her large bosom; nightdress flared over her plump, round hips. I leaned in until my nose narrowed against hers.

Her eyes were a lush green forest, but the more intently I stared, none of it seemed to make sense and they ceased to resemble anything normal. Was I looking into a set of eyes or a photograph of the entire universe at large? I tried to catch the eye moving with glances to the left and right, but I wasn't quick enough. This wasn't me, was it?

"It's going to be okay, darling," said the rouge-coated lips in the mirror.

I blacked out.

I emerged from the bathroom dressed in a slim-fitted, starch-white blouse tucked into a tight, grey woollen pencil skirt that laboured my stride. Black four-inch high heels smartly turned out my feet, housing the lace-top sheer hosiery that ran up beneath the skirt.

With my hair tied back into a slick braided low bun and my complexion milky pale from a thick coat of makeup, I was a mini-Mother.

Glancing at my wristwatch, the tiny hands told me it was 13:23. I must have slept in. I had so much to do! Mother would be calling soon and I needed to be ready.

Apron garbed over my body and tied neatly around my waist, I was ready to go. I dusted each room, including the topsides of all the furniture, undersides of shelves, and all handrails, as well as picture frames, TV screens and knick-knacks. You wouldn't believe how much dust can gather in a mere day.

I went through the entire house, stripped all the beds, and remade them; neatening any pillows or furniture blankets. I then brushed the furniture surfaces with a vacuum extension, as needed, of course. I wiped down all surfaces and counters throughout the house, disinfecting as necessary.

I walked through the bathroom and sprayed cleaner on tubs, sinks and toilets. Then, in the kitchen, I wiped down the inside of the microwave, cabinets, and appliance doors. I swept and then mopped the kitchen, bathroom, and all wooden floors, returning to the tubs and toilets for a final scrub. I then gave a final vacuum out of the bedrooms, down the stairs, through the living room and out of the house.

15:06.

It was too early to commence preparations for Adam's arrival home. I checked the refrigerator. Fully stocked. No need to go to the supermarket then. A glass of wine was calling to me from the cabinet and – *ah yes!* I thought. *I forgot to water the damned flowers!*

I slid open the back door and was greeted by a sun so alarmingly bright that my eyes took a moment to adjust. I picked up the hose attached to the reel

bolted into the wall. Stuck. I tugged harder until the knot broke free from the reel. Thrown off balance, my ankle nearly twisted over my contorted heel. I quickly composed myself with elevated pomposity and poise, for I must be consistently exempt from graceless bearing. Luckily, my neighbours were not outside today.

The sound of busy bees whizzing about the greenery filled the garden, as I clip-clopped on each stepping stone down to the garden end. Turning the nozzle around, I sprayed the beds of Tulips, Daffodils, Crocus, and Pansies.

The hypnotic spray of the water hissing brought me to a place far away from where I stood. I gazed at the pansy petals, knowing well that I was drowning the violet corolla in too much water, yet unable to break free of the trance. Time seemed to slow down. Whispers ran through the water. I tried to listen, but my hearing function was stuck on the precipice of understanding the words.

“Yoo-hoo!”

I broke free, agitated by the sudden interruption coming from the left. There was a frightfully old woman peering over the fence, her stringy white hair and sunken eyes in view. The rest of her was hidden by the wood panelling. “It’s easy to get lost on a beautiful Spring day, isn’t it?” she said.

I gawped at the old woman. I had never seen her before, nor any of my new neighbours for that matter. I turned the hose off and resumed taking in the unusual sight. She looked far too old to be alive. Her leathery, sun-spot-coated skin sent unnerving chills down my spine.

“You must be Adam’s partner,” she crowed. “He’s such a lovely boy. It’s so nice to see him finally settle down with such a pretty young woman. I was beginning to wonder if he would be a bachelor for life or worse one of those fancy boys.”

The old woman stared at me for a chillingly long time, her raised dimples informing me of her masked smile behind the fence. *Was this some sort of bad joke?* I thought. I was locked in a seemingly never-ending staring contest with this stranger. She looked at me with the intent of someone who could read minds.

“And a true lady you are,” the old woman harped on. “Old folks like me don’t see the likes of you anymore. These days boys want to be girls and girls want to be boys, it’s all mixed-up nonsense, I say!”

I broke away from the locked gaze and reeled up a portion of the hose, averting my gaze while I marched back towards the back door. I didn’t wish to talk to this old crone. I felt like my blouse was tightening against my skin, squeezing the air from my lungs while my heart attempted to burst from my chest.

“Perhaps we will hear wedding bells soon?” the old woman rasped. I just kept walking and didn’t look back. “It was nice to talk to you, sweetie!”

I immediately feel safe the moment I’m back inside. I checked my phone to find there were no missed calls or texts from Mother. No matter, for it was time to prepare for Adam’s arrival anyway. I donned my apron once again and commenced food preparation with the focus of an all-star chef. In a large bowl, I combined ground beef, egg, onion, milk and bread crumbs, seasoning the mixture with salt and pepper. In a separate small bowl, I combined brown sugar, mustard



and tomato puree, pouring the mixture all over the meatloaf before placing it into the oven.

Still no call from Mother, but that's okay, I was rather busy anyway.

I poured myself a glass of cabernet sauvignon and swigged a generous mouthful. Next, I peeled some carrots and parsnips into strips, coating them in olive oil, salt, and honey in preparation for the air fryer. After that, I began peeling the potatoes for the boiling pot on the hob.

I heard the front door shut closed, and the rustle of jackets and boots being taken off in the hallway. I knew Adam would saunter in through the kitchen door and pause for a moment to ogle at my rear.

Then he would wordlessly approach me from behind, hands slithering around my waist, as he pressed his bulk against me. "How was your day?" he would say lowly into my ear.

"Good," I'd say, conveying a weary sigh that implied a hectic day filled with domestic duties. "How was yours?"

And then he would give a few details about various accounts throughout the day, interspersed with light kisses on my neck before asking how long the dinner would be. "About thirty minutes," I'd say, and then he would go upstairs for a shower after pinching my buttocks.

This is precisely what happened.

I had a few more glasses of wine and a few bites of meatloaf. I found it hard to eat when drinking. While

we silently finished our meals, my phone finally buzzed. Within a flash, I answered, and was greeted by Mother's beautiful, smiling face looking right at me. "Hello, darling," she said, the video slightly pixelated.

"Hello, Mother," I said, feeling my cheeks burn red. I was so nervous. "H-How are things at home?"

"Good," she said. She seemed to mean it. "Besides constantly feeling like a beached whale, I feel pretty good for a woman about to squeeze a melon out of me."

I didn't wish to speak of the pregnancy.

"Hey there, Ellie!" Daniel's voice bellowed in the background.

Something cracked inside me. Why must Daniel always cut in when I merely wanted to chat to Mother alone, but my undying respect for my creator wrestled me into politeness. "Hi Daniel," I said, perhaps feigning too much enthusiasm to seem truthful.

Then he appeared in frame, arms draped around Mother's shoulders while he looked on with the persuasion of a man who could love her more than I. He was ridiculous. "I hope you're feeding that boy of mine!" he said. I glanced up at Adam and flipped the camera around.

"Hi Dad," he said, barely looking up from his phone.

"Check this out," said Daniel, taking the phone from Mother's hands. He flipped it around and gave a full view of her standing by the kitchen island. She was cradling her bump with the air of a bashful bride. "She's ready to pop any minute now!"

I couldn't bring myself to comment so I forced a gladdened smile. I pull the camera away from me in the hopes of Mother noticing the efforts I made in attributing my appearance to her honour.

"Darling, I love your blouse," said Mother. "Where did you get it?"

"Same department store as you, Mother," I said, excitement titillating my senses. "Do you miss work?"

"To be honest, not that much," said Mother, sighing. "However, I do miss simply being in the office with you."

"R-Really?" I said, feeling a rush of endorphins. It was an incredible feeling.

"Of course, darling!" said Mother. "We were a team, you and I."

*Were.*

"Maybe when your maternity leave is over, I could come back," I said, desperation kicking in.

"It needn't be full-time, perhaps a day or two to -,"

"Darling, there's a huge distance between us," said Mother. "It's not feasible in the long term. It wouldn't be fair to be away from Adam when there are plenty of opportunities for you in the city."

I glanced up at Adam, but thankfully he had already left the kitchen for the sitting room. "I-I understand," I said, unable to look at Mother. I knew she was right and I already regretted coming across as possessive. I wanted to change the subject. "You were right about

everything by the way. Moving in with Adam has been the best decision I've ever made. I'm very, very happy now."

"That's wonderful, darling!" Mother beamed. "I told you independence would help you blossom."

"Yes...", I said. "Independence."

"You've really grown into your skin," said Mother. "I can't tell you how proud that makes me feel."

I felt like crying. "Thanks, Mother," I said, fighting my quivering lip. "That means so much to me."

"It was lovely to speak with you, darling."

"Likewise."

Alone again after the press of a button, I sat quietly for a few moments, as I basked in the afterglow of simply hearing Mother's voice. She complimented my appearance. She said she missed me. She said she was proud of me.

It was the happiest I'd felt since I saw her two months ago, but then a peculiar sense of fear fell upon me. I take another swig of wine to calm it, but the unease didn't abate. It felt like a premonition; an awful sense of dread, if you will. And it told me that this may be the last time Mother and I spoke.

## 2.

The wedding dress was of vintage design, tailored with glistening white satin that could have adorned a Christmas tree angel. The corset that clenched my waist flared out into a voluminous bell-shaped skirt,

held wide by a series of four to six lace-trimmed petticoats. An abundance of satin, nylon, rayon and taffeta gave the gown a hyper-feminine rustle that forced me to confront who I was perceived to be. A white, double-layered chiffon veil obscured the man standing at the altar, the man that would soon be *my* husband. Had I walked into an alternate dimension?

As I timidly walked down the aisle, lugging the tremendous weight of the satin train behind me, a profound sense of fear overcame me. The organ player may have been belting out The Wedding March, but I could no longer hear the music. I was far away from where I was supposed to be.

My corset seemed to tighten, restricting my breath to a minimum. My bosom rose and fell with each laboured breath, fingers fused to the bridal bouquet with a vice-like grip. All ten guests in attendance turned around to gaze upon me with their placid smiles, furthering my anxieties to a fever pitch. All the attention humiliated me to the point of scarlet red cheeks.

I was a blushing bride for all the wrong reasons.

I slowly step and pause up the aisle, as practised. Each guest registers in my periphery for the menace of the altar consumed my attention. There was Mrs Murphy, the wrinkled old crone that lived next door to Adam and me.

Next to Mrs Murphy was her portly middle-aged son, Nigel, who looked vaguely annoyed for having to accompany his mother to the wedding of someone he never met. There were Alan and Charlie, two work colleagues of Adam. Then there was the dreaded Daniel sitting next to the most beautiful woman his hand

dared to touch: *my Mother.*

She looked radiant in her rose, a-line dress, hair immaculately unfurled over her shoulders like velvet drapes. We locked eyes, and for a brief moment, everything appeared to suspend itself in time. Indescribable ecstasy spread tingles from the ends of my toes to the tips of my fingers. The eruption of her godly beauty caused everything to come flooding back. The love I felt for her. The pain of separation. That face still had the power to make my body tremble. One second in the presence of that measureless beauty and I was lost.

That is until the joy dissipated at the sight of my wretched twelve-month-old step-sister, Holly. I loathed her more than the situation I found myself in. As I neared the altar, I was dragged back into my hellish world.

Adam looked upon me with the bearing of a man who was deeply nervous, but also deeply in love. As I stood next to him, he placed his hand on the small of my back. I forced my eyes to meet his. I was nauseated by his doe-eyedness yet grateful that my trembling legs were hidden beneath the elaborate skirt. The minister stood in front of us with an air of serenity and repose. When the music finished, he filled the chasm in his wake with his reverberating dulcet voice.

While the ceremony wore on, I recited each step we practised in the rehearsals. I was on auto-pilot, indicating nothing more than the cues to participate in what felt like a lifetime contract of imprisonment. I recalled the day when Adam proposed to me six months ago. Mother was hosting a garden party at her house. I was enjoying myself for the first time in what seemed like an age. We were together again, two peas

in a pod, despite the contemptible infant that suckled on her breast.

I remembered how the beautiful evening sky was painted in shades of fire and blue. Anything felt possible. The jovial atmosphere was reaching its climax when I turned in my seat to find Adam down on one knee. *No, no, no!* I thought. *Not this! No!*

Turns out the garden party was a trap to snare me into making one of the most important decisions of my life. A little box with a shimmering diamond ring glistened in the sunset light, blinding me with intense panic. Vulnerability welled in Adam's pleading eyes, as he gazed up lovingly at my dumbfounded face. Four simple words passed his lips that would forever seal my fate: "Will you marry me?"

I need not tell you how I responded.

We exited the church to uproarious applause. A burst of confetti showered down upon us, making me jump like a frightened cat. My facial muscles ached from the feigned smile I forced upon it. The clapping and cheering were overwhelming.

I clung to the crook of Adam's arm as a blind person would to a guide. I gave up control and hoped he would steer me in the right direction for the remainder of the day. Amid all the chaos, I allowed myself a moment's respite in dropping my head to all leering eyes. Seeing the ornate dress on me felt like an out-of-body experience.

The overly enthused photographer called on me to look up for a picture. I quickly slipped back into my blushing bride exterior, staring into the lens with a smile so forced it may have appeared insincere. Each

click of the shutter felt like an incremental humiliation in itself until my eye was drawn over the shoulder of the photographer.

Across the road there stood a woman with a German Shepherd dog on a harness. She looked vaguely familiar. Squinting, I focused in to discover that it was, *oh my god, Jess!* My skin boiled over at the sight of her. I looked away, resuming my faux smile for the camera. When the photographer finished snapping, I glanced over to where she stood once more.

She had already moved on.

The wedding photographs from that fateful day lined the staircase of our home for many years after. Every waking moment living as Mrs Ellie Ford served as a constant reminder of those two words: "I do." They also boasted of a bride that was very different from the woman I was to become, the woman that I was now: a lonely housewife, forever committed to house and husband.

As the years passed by, being a wife and daughter was all I came to know. I felt so unlike the adolescent male from my formative years that I questioned if I was ever him to begin with. He was nothing more than a faded dream. There wasn't any evidence to suggest that the person I used to be existed. On the rare occasion when I considered that person, horrible feelings would resurface from the depths of my soul.

As an alternative, I would recall the image of a little girl, about seven years old, in a yellow summer dress and frilled white socks. She was holding Mother's hand. *I was holding Mother's hand.* The image brought me unparalleled warmth. I thought about this image so much until it felt real. The connection felt



completely uninhibited.

It *had* to be real.

The highlight of every year was Christmastime. I was unshackled from the home for a whole two months. Winter was off-season in Adam's line of work, which meant that would close the business. We would then vacate our city life to live in Hazelbrook for all of December and January. He started this annual tradition by renting us a small beach house just a five-minute walk away from Mother's house.

Eventually, after several years, he bought the property. It was probably the best thing he ever did for me. The poor weather holidaying didn't bother me in the slightest. Being able to spend every day in Mother's company was more than enough sunshine for me. Those precious two months made the other ten all the easier to bear.

Mother and I would spend every day together just like in the old times. We went to the salon together, shopped together, and drank together. She would recount memories of when I was a little girl, memories such as how I used to dress up in her clothes or arrange all my Barbie dolls in a straight line without playing with them. I had no memory of these tales but I thought about them so much until they became true to my heart. At home, we watched all of the same television shows and exchanged various recipes we had gathered to feed our respective husbands.

Yes, Mother and Daniel also tied the knot. I don't have anything else to say on the matter.

On new years day of each year, we made a tradition of dolling ourselves up to go for afternoon tea down

at the local country club. She would relate all the personal details of her marriage to Daniel, both the good and the bad. But mostly she talked about Holly; how she was doing at school; which friends she liked or disliked; how she could be the sweetest girl one minute and then the cheekiest brat the other.

Whenever Mother spoke of her daughter, it took every ounce of my strength to mask my hatred. Even as she grew into a toddler, a girl, and finally a teenager; my resentment only grew in concurrence. Sometimes I'd catch glimpses of dear Mother in her mannerisms and facial expressions. She resembled her in all the natural ways I could only wish to possess. These strong feelings were confusing because Holly reminded me of some hard facts that I couldn't bring myself to consider.

Adam and I had a well-structured, albeit unremarkable marriage without boldness or excitement. It was difficult at first but it did get easier the longer we were together. He was a creature of routine, which suited me down to the ground. A structure meant order. Order meant consistency of the mind. This was vital in keeping me from being introspective. Being there for my husband gave me purpose, a reason to live if you will. I truly committed myself to wifely duties, cooking all the meals and doing all the housework, except on Saturdays when I was treated to dinner and drinks.

Adam paid for everything but also gave me a generous allowance to spend on whatever I liked. I usually used this money to uphold my physical appearance to the standards of which Mother had trained me. Makeovers, designer clothes, spas; what else could I spend it on but being the perfect lady just like Mother?

As the years wore on, Adam gradually showed the

more lascivious side of his personality. He became more confident in his sexual prowess to the point where I felt like a subject to all his seedy sexual experiments. He soon learned that my timid nature left him a lot of room to exploit my body. I was the first and only woman he would ever have so the pressure to perform was high.

Regardless, it was apparent that a fifties-style housewife piqued Adam to a state of unsettling eroticism. He loved sitting in his armchair, watching me clip-clop around the house with my feather duster; hips wiggling and breasts bouncing in my tight blouses and skirts. It was like foreplay to him. Of course, this made me feel deeply uncomfortable, but I had no choice but to hide all my reservations. I was his wife. This was what he wanted, but more importantly, it was what Mother expected of me.

At first, Adam was rather meek and cordial whenever he asked me to mix things up in the bedroom. He would trip over his words when merely asking me to change something as simple as positioning. As time passed by, he became less courteous.

Sex steadily became a near-daily occurrence and it wasn't always restricted to the bedroom. He would arrive home from work, and nuzzle my neck before spreading my legs by the kitchen sink to take me right there. Times like these made me feel like nothing more than a hole to be filled. Other times he was more gracious and passionate, as he expressed his love for me in ways that could have felt transmissible if I wasn't so numb to it all.

In the early years of our marriage, I often struggled to maintain the façade of gladly receiving his overbearing lust. Adam may have been insecure about

his intelligence but he was far more unguarded about his abilities as a lover and husband. We argued a lot; well, rather he argued a lot. He would say things like, “Sometimes I wonder if you love me at all!” and that I was a poor communicator when it came to the bedroom. Countless altercations resulted in me trying to convince Adam that I *did* love him, that I *was* happy and that I *was* enjoying myself.

I had to double down and bury all of my misgivings to keep up appearances. I took extra steps to assure that all unease was masked behind a smile. Instead of simply putting his dinner in front of him every evening before taking my seat, I added a kiss and a smile. Rather than facing away after getting into bed every night, I cuddled up to him and stroked his face before the inevitable intercourse. Sex was bound to happen regardless. I could pretend to welcome it at the very least. Sometimes I was lucky to soothe him to sleep.

The burden of maintaining the exterior of a subservient housewife gradually numbed over time. At first, the façade was a conscious effort but it soon became second nature whenever Adam was around. It didn’t feel like a performance for evenings and weekends, as it became part of my strict routine.

However, on occasion, during the day when the house was quiet and empty; when all the housework was done and all I had to do was wait for Adam, a switch would turn on in my brain. The switch heightened my self-awareness to unbearable heights. No amount of domestic chores could distract me from the bleak thoughts hidden in the margins of my psyche. During these sporadic bouts, I found myself drinking more during the day to dull the indecipherable emotions rising from the pit of my stomach.

I felt a strong sense of disassociation towards the woman in the mirror. She was prim and proper with her satin blouses and woollen skirts, yet also incredibly sexualised. All the efforts I made to present myself as such would suddenly feel in vain. I'd feel self-conscious of my body, as though it didn't belong to me. The large breasts, the wide hips, the immaculate black locks, the vulva; it all seemed so... *wrong*. Who was that contoured, feminine visage looking back at me? In time, I found that all of the drinking was making these feelings worse. I relayed my depressive state to Mother who was, of course, there for me as always.

"Oh darling," she said sympathetically. "You've got a syndrome many a home-maker has been plighted with for generations. Leave it to me and everything will be okay, I promise you this."

Mother prescribed me Valium to self-administer whenever I felt blue. After a while, lithium became my go-to medication. I couldn't fathom whether it was the passing of time that made life more bearable or if it was the drugs. My prescriptions were a secret between Mother and me. Not even Adam was aware, although sometimes I wondered if he knew and didn't wish to address it. After years of marriage, I believed he was just happy to have a pair of breasts to fondle every day.

The tedium of being Mrs Ellie Ford made my days feel stretched yet when I stopped to give pause and reflect, another year had slipped away down the stream of time. Vast gaps of black consumed the palace of my memory in between inexplicable periods of joy and tremendous sadness. The monotonous routine numbed me to the fact that this was what I was now. Even if I tried to be something other than a Mrs Ellie Ford, I

was certain to fail. Anything beyond the limitations of my housebound regime was far too frightening to consider.

Every day of my marriage to Adam blended unmemorably into the next. I believed the secret to contentment was to find congenial monotony with him. Nevertheless, our routine collapsed time only to unfold when the novelty of seeing Mother at Christmas came around once again. My baser instinct to keep existing continued to operate unimpeded at the expense of my ability to feel. I used to frequently 'go away' in the early years of my life but now I was more or less constantly gone.

As time wore on endlessly, the solitude of not belonging invaded me like ivy on a wall, turning me into a robot. I disconnected from the act of being Mrs Ford, the perpetrator and myself. I viewed every scene from above, as though I was no longer in my body. Sometimes I didn't recognize the faces of people I had known for years, like Adam. I still knew it was him, but his features often looked mangled and foreign. The fact that I had looked at it thousands of times now seemed strange.

Everything felt so far away.

### 3.

Twelve years had slipped away after I said: "I do."

And then everything changed on one seemingly unremarkable day...

On the morning after my thirty-fourth birthday, I awoke to beautiful sunlight beaming through the curtain fissure. Hair tousled over my face, I heaved

myself into an upright position, looking closely at how the dust danced within the rays of golden sunshine. It was 06:30 once again.

I could never sleep beyond this time regardless of how late I fell asleep. Adam lay next to me in a deep sleep, his hairy chest rising and falling with each laboured snore. I needn't wake the beast.

I threw my legs over the side of the bed, breasts swinging like two pendulums of water balloons. I felt disgusting, as a dried layer of sweat coated my skin after a long night of intense lovemaking. A dull pain stung in my rear, reminding me of the pleasure it bore only a few hours ago.

In the mirrored wardrobe doors, I caught a glimpse of the true woman staring back at me. Age had scarred her with subtle under-eye wrinkles, soon to be masked with makeup. She stood up and inspected the cellulite that carved lines below her panty-line and thighs. Over a decade of fluctuating weight had made her look mature. Deep down she felt a lot older than thirty-four. She couldn't explain why, but she felt as though her true age was, in fact, forty. Perhaps it was.

Within the blink of an eye, I found myself standing in the kitchen, idly staring into the food cupboard. I couldn't remember what I was doing. I looked around to get my bearings and nearly stumbled over the patent leather heels of rouge that adorned my feet.

When I looked down I discovered that I was also wearing a black leather pencil skirt that strained against my wide hips. I could only deny that I had grown a size bigger since I last wore it. Tucked into the skirt was a light, cap-sleeved garment of cotton white with a rounded collar folded over the neckline of

a snug pink sweater.

I glanced at the clock, my heart racing, as it always did when time appeared to jump around. It was now 11:00 a.m. on the dot. Adam had been gone to work for hours.

*Ding, dong!*

“Goodness!” I said, alarmed. “I wonder who that could be?”

I started to feel anxious. It was rare to hear the doorbell chime. I wasn’t expecting a courier, nor a visit from a neighbour or family member. Disruption to my regime such as this was most unwelcome.

I clip-clopped out of the kitchen into the hallway when an inexplicable icy chill ran down my spine. The silhouette of two figures in the frosted glass frightened me. Something deep down was urging me to ignore them, but what if something was wrong? The doorbell rang again followed by a series of urgent knocks. “Open up! It’s the police!” boomed a deep voice.

I could feel myself shrinking in the light of the doorway. *Why were the police here?* I thought. *I haven’t done anything wrong!* In that instant, I deeply wished that Adam was there to protect me. The thought of dealing with the police terrified me. They scared me more than anything in the world. I jumped again at the aggressive knocking, “Ma’am, we know you’re in there. Open up!”

I can’t explain what happened next. I lost control and became a mere passenger in my body. *What if something has happened to Mother?* I thought. I marched to the door and opened it with a welcoming smile. Two male



police officers, one senior and the other junior stood there with their badges presented.

“Good morning, officers,” I said, sweeter than candy. “Apologies if I kept you. I was just, um, getting dressed upstairs. What can I do for you?”

The two officers glanced at one another with a sense of forbearance. The older officer sucked on his teeth before asking; “Are you, Mrs Ellie Ford?”

“Why yes,” I said, my smile gradually fading. “Is there a problem I should know about?”

“We have a warrant for your arrest,” said the young officer. He removed the handcuffs that hung from his belt and moved towards me. “Under the Identity Theft and Assumption Deterrence Act of nineteen-sixty-eight, you are under arrest for using, without lawful authority, a means of identification of another person with the intent to commit or to aid or abet, any unlawful activity that constitutes a violation of state law. You do not have to say anything. But, it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given as evidence.”

Before I could respond, the younger officer had me cuffed from behind. “I-I don’t understand,” I said, hands quivering within the steel shackles. “I haven’t d-done anything – did you say identity theft?”

“Yes ma’am,” said the older officer. “We’re just going to take you down to the station for some questioning. Now if you would allow us to escort you to the vehicle –,”

“I haven’t done anything wrong!” I said vehemently.

I was confused and therefore very scared. A wave of claustrophobia boxed me in, restricting my breath, as I tried to face my accusers. They prevented my turnabout by firmly gripping my arms before facing me towards the police car. "I-I haven't done anything wrong!"

The police officers silently guided me down the path. The back-seat door of the squad car loomed like a gaping black hole, cold and ominous. I was reminded of a long-forgotten memory that started to reopen a wound from deep within.

Inexorable fear spread throughout my body, paralysing me. "I'm just a simple h-housewife. How could I ever d-do any wrong? P-Please don't put me in that car!"

The police officers remained silent as they shepherded me to my doom. My eyes rolled around in my skull, heart pounding in my chest, as I sought help, but my neighbours across the road only watched on like statues. The officers lowered my head into the back of the car.

I was so frightened that I could only shout one thing: "Mother!"

I sobbed for the entire journey down to the station. I plead with the officers to give me some answers but they were bound to dutiful silence. My mind raced faster than I could keep up with; a complete mess of conflicting emotions and thought.

Was this really happening? Had I taken too many pills this morning? Over the years, I found that the line between reality and delusion tended to blur at times. This, however, felt painfully real. I was naked, vulnerable, exposed; an infant cruelly ripped from the

womb, shaking all over and wanting nothing else but her mother.

When we arrived at the station, I was escorted inside by the firm grip of my captors. Sensory overload dulled my ability to function as the flash of a police camera captured my likeness. My fingerprints were taken and I was then placed into a holding cell with some questionable-looking people.

“I haven’t done anything wrong!” I cried, gripping the steel bars that caged me. “Please don’t lock me in here!”

The entire ordeal had left me in a state of fever-pitch trauma. Everyone appeared to be looking at me; the tattooed beast next to me, the officer behind the desk, and the guard standing by the gate.

Being outside of the home under such stressful and confusing circumstances locked me into a state of complete disassociation. I couldn’t sit. I could only hold onto the bars that caged me. I wanted Mother. I needed her more than anything. She would be able to set this straight. She always did.

Several hours passed by until I’m granted a telephone call. An officer guides me over to the phone and waited for me to complete my two minutes. My manicured nails trembled as I punched in the number. It rings for some time until Mother picked up the phone.

“Ford residence, how may I help you?” she said in her soothing, breathy tone.

Hot pools of tears spilt from my eyes the moment I hear her voice. “H-Hello, Mother,” I sobbed into the receiver.

“Oh what’s the matter, darling?” said Mother urgently. “Why are you calling with this strange number? I almost didn’t answer!”

“I-I’ve – I mean, I’ve,” I stammered. I could feel my brain shortcircuit, as I searched for the appropriate manner to break such dreadful news. “The p-police have taken me in. You h-have to help me. I’m so s-scared, Mother!”

“ ... ”

“M-Mother, are you there?”

“ ... ”

“P-Please say something!”

For a second, I thought I had lost the line. I couldn’t hear Mother’s breath. “Why would the police take you, darling?” she said, breaking the icy silence.

“I’m not sure. It all happened so f-fast. I was just getting r-ready for the day when they arrived at the d-door. I think they s-said something about identity t-theft.”

“Identity theft?”

“Yes! Y-You have to help me! I don’t know what else to do!”

“Just tell them the truth, darling,” said Mother, rather non-nonchalantly. “You are Mrs Ellie Ford. It’s as simple as that.”

A part of me told me this wasn’t good enough. These brutes wouldn’t accept that answer. I needed her by

my side. The officer standing next to me tapped on his watch to warn me that I was running low on time. "I-I have to go, Mother. C-Could you come to Mill Street Station please?"

"..."

"Mother!"

"Of course, I'll be there, darling. It's a long drive but I'll be there as soon as I can," she said calmly. "I love you."

"I-I love you too."

I shakily placed the phone onto the receiver and turned to be escorted back to the holding cell. The reality of my situation attempted to dawn itself on my mind but I closed it away in preparation for Mother's arrival. She would be able to set this straight. She always did. She always did!

After enduring several hours of catcalling from the inhabitants of the male cell, a different escort returned and called my name.

"Are you t-taking me to see my Mother?" I asked.

"No," he said bluntly.

He took me out of the cell and brought me to a small room on the other side of the building. Waiting in the room was a middle-aged man with a bushy moustache, beady eyes and an ill-fitted brown suit. He sat at the opposite end of a table facing an empty seat that waited for me.

"Please, sit down," said the man.

The click of the door locking brought back feelings from another life. They threatened to destroy everything I had. I couldn't move. I couldn't even hear the man.

"I know you're scared, ma'am, but the sooner we get this business over with the sooner we can both move on with our lives."

I was in the seat unable to look the man in the eye. I kept my head bowed, eyes fixed on the trembling hands that I struggled to control.

"I'm Detective Inspector Mullins, I specialise in monitoring and gathering intelligence on fraudulent activity. It has come to my attention that you have appropriated the name and social security credentials of Ms Ellie Davenport, a young woman who died over fifteen years ago. For the past twelve years you've taken the name, Ford, after marrying a -," he stopped to check his papers, "-Mr. Adam Ford."

The detective paused for a moment and waited for me to respond. My thoughts were so scattered that my ability to function normally seemed impossible. "I-I don't understand what's going on," I said meekly, lip quivering with blurred with hot tears. "I am Mrs. Ellie F-Ford. This has to be a m-mistake."

The detective stayed quiet for an inordinate amount of time. The rustling of papers was sharp and irritating, as I wiped the tears from my eyes. When I looked up, the detective leaned forward and joined his hands.

"I don't think you understand the situation we have here," he said calmly. "You have been arrested for identity theft of a deceased person. I've got the dossier of evidence right here. Now I understand that all of

this must be very frightening but I'm here to help you."

Every word that came out of the man's mouth didn't make any sense. He claimed that I wasn't me. Had I finally gone crazy? Surely he had to be the crazy one. That is, if he was, in fact, a real person. "I'm just a simple h-housewife," I said, sobbing. "My name is Ellie. I've always been Ellie. P-Please, I want Mother. She will set everything straight. She always does."

He leaned back in his creaky seat and looked upon me with the twisted expression of a man caught in the bind of a curious puzzle. "According to my colleagues she's on her way," he said, pausing for a moment. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

I could only shake my head repeatedly. I didn't like this so-called detective. His insistent questioning was making me confront something that I couldn't quite remember. I wanted it to stay forgotten.

"Are you running from something or someone?"

I shook my head again, wishing only to be taken out of the four walls closing in on me. The detective sighed, rubbing the back of his balding head. He leaned forward again and pulled my gaze into his watery eyes. "You can trust me," he said softly. "It's the end of the road. You don't have to hide anymore. You can say who you really are."

Something snapped. He shouldn't have cornered me like that. Inexplicable rage rattled through my body, raising all defences to stop this madman from prodding me further. "I know exactly who I am!" I shouted in a deep voice I couldn't recognise. It petrified me. The mask had slipped. I attempted to

regain composure. "I can't – I won't entertain this madness a second longer! T-This has to be a mistake!"

The detective relented his questions for a moment. "Okay," he mumbled. He turned to his dossier and flicked through a number of sheets. He removed one and slid it over to me. He gestured towards it with a nod. I couldn't look. Something deep down told me it was dangerous. Why should I listen to anything this man said to me? He had done nothing but intimidate me with wild accusations. Mother certainly wouldn't trust him so why should I?

The detective sighed impatiently. "The fingerprints you gave us this morning brought up a match. Brian Philips, does that name ring any bells?"

Brian Philips? I thought. Something clicked inside. The name did sound familiar. I was certain I knew someone by that name but I was caught on the edge of recollection. I was laughing. This delusion may have been more realistic and intense than previous ones but I figured I may as well enjoy it while it lasted.

"Do I look like someone with a name like Brian Philips?" I chortled.

The detective squirmed in his seat, as he eyed me up and down. I made him uncomfortable. "Well no," he said nervously, "but fingerprints don't lie."

"Well there has to be an error," I sneered. I stood up in preparation for my exit. "I don't have to put up with this nonsense. I'm calling my husband to pick me up."

I turned to the exit and banged on the door. "Guards! Release me, please! We're done!"



"I'm afraid you can't leave while you're under our custody," said the detective, matter-of-factly. "Please sit down and take a look at the photograph I handed you."

My brief spurt of resilience quickly faded. I couldn't explain why I refused to look at the photo. Perhaps I didn't have to. I knew very well who I was. I was Mrs Ellie Ford. But why was I so petrified of something that I couldn't quite remember? My vision began to flatten, my heart tapping against my chest as my brain overflowed.

The detective wore a disturbed expression that didn't help quell my rising anxieties. He stood up and asked me to take my seat again. I refused, shouting gibberish about lawyers and citizen rights. He moved closer to me, arm outstretched, as though I was a dangerous animal that needed calming. It made me feel worse. I cried out for help.

The detective circled me around the room until he was at the door. "It's okay," he said, clearly out of his depth. "Everything is okay. You're not in trouble. As I said, I'm here to help."

"Where is Mother?!"

"I'm just gonna check if she's here, okay?" said the detective, backed against the door. He gave a particular series of knocks that brought the guards to unlock the door.

I don't know how I managed to sit on the floor in my restrictive skirt. I cowered into the corner, left alone to stare at the locked door, feeling boxed in by the four walls that surround me. I was about to die, I was sure of it. I was on the edge of a cliff, stunned by the river

of difficult emotions that flowed below me. Hot tears poured from my eyes, as though a hidden self was desperately pleading for help.

The photo that the detective tried to show me was still on the table. I couldn't look at it. I wouldn't. Why am I crying? I thought. Why do I have to be so bloody weak? I shakily sit down and close my eyes. Breathing in deep through the nose and out through the mouth, I focused hard on removing myself from the panic, as I had done on many occasions over the years. I drifted into the black of my mind until I saw nothing but abstract purples and pinks. My heart rate gradually slowed down, as calm washed over me like a soothing salve. I was ready to return.

My mouth is suddenly filled with metal. When I opened my eyes, I looked down to find that my legs are garbed in knee-high socks of cotton white with a navy and crimson plaid skirt. I licked my teeth to find that I had braces. I was wearing a dark navy sweater, its v-neck displaying the primly knotted tie between the starch blouse collar of white. I run my fingers through my brunette pigtails. My breasts and hips were also of normal size. I felt young again. I was young again.

Mother was sitting in the detective's chair staring at the locked door.

"Mother!" I squealed, overjoyed. "I was so scared that I'd never see you again!"

Mother looked over her shoulder, her smile radiating daggers of tingling sensations throughout my body. I was ecstatic. "Of course, I came, darling," said Mother. She rose out of her seat, her red cheongsam dress shining in the light like a Christmas tree angel.

She smoothed out the skirt and sat on the floor next to me. She moved like an ethereal force of nature; graceful, powerful and pure.

“I don’t know what’s going on. The police came and took me this morning. They keep asking me strange questions. I-I don’t know how to answer –,”

“Shh,” Mother hushed softly. “Don’t worry, darling. Mother is here now.”

“I-I’ve missed you so much,” I squeaked, welling up once again.

“I’ve missed you too,” said Mother, placing her hand on my cheek.

I nuzzled my cheek into her palm, as a cat would to its owner, intertwining her fingers with mine. Titillating sensations pulsed through my body. It was a feeling that I could only describe as *orgasmic*. She pulled me in and rested my head on her bosom.

My head is filled with the sound of her heartbeat as it rose and fell with each breath. I was on a cloud bound for heaven. I threw my right leg over her, mounting her, as I held her face in my hands. Breast-to-breast, I gazed into her deep, loving eyes. I’m not going to look at the photo, I thought.

*I know*, said Mother, words echoing in my mind. *Let’s just stay in this moment forever.*

#### 4.

Mrs Ellie Ford, the woman that was arrested for identity fraud, was sent far away. After being assessed by a court of law and medical professionals, she was

placed in a facility that could only be described as a cross between a hospital and a spa retreat. Instead of steel bars and rock-hard bunks, there was greenery and soothing music. Instead of gruel and abusive guards, some caring professionals asked a lot of personal questions. Nevertheless, she believed that her rights had been breached. She was dragged into her indefinite home kicking and screaming.

Mrs Ford still felt that she had been ensnared against her will. She pleaded to return to her normal life. But little did she know that the life she desperately yearned for was anything but normal. The people that worked in the facility wouldn't even allow Mrs Ford the medications that her dear mother had prescribed to calm her nerves. Without such respite, Mrs Ford fell into a deep pit of despair. This only furthered her strong belief that these people were acting with the intent of harming her and her interests.

Mrs Ford missed her dear mother more than anything else. All she wanted was one phone call, even just to say hello, but the facilitators wouldn't even allow her that. This, of course, upset Mrs Ford to no end. She was so upset that sometimes in the dead of night, she could feel her dear mother by her side. She couldn't quite see her but she could feel her presence. Even though she knew it wasn't real but the tinge of warmth gave her hope that they would be together again one day. She was certain that her mother would come to rescue her. Every day she remained hopeful that the door would open, and there she would stand, like the goddess she was.

For Mrs Ford, time stretched out further into the seemingly infinite. After spending an indecipherable length of time in the facility, the day she hoped for more than anything else started to feel increasingly

out of reach. Doubt crept into the periphery of her psyche. It may have been the new pills she had been prescribed or perhaps it was the extensive talk therapy sessions, but after some time, she started to feel abandoned by her mother.

“Don’t be frightened. We will be together again. Don’t you worry, darling.”

“But when, Mother? Where are you? I need you!”

“Soon, darling. You’ve just got to hang in there.”

Mrs Ford was distraught. Her patience had run thin. She didn’t know how long she had been trapped in the facility. She was entangled in a liminal space, caught between two states of being, unable to move forward or backwards. She started to feel like she was on the precipice of something new but wasn’t quite there yet.

Instead of looking back, she began to envision a frightening future into the unknowable. Intense anger boiled in her veins. For some time, she closed down and refused to speak to anyone. She wouldn’t even eat. But the anger remained. Oh, how it simmered deep within her.

*Mother abandoned me, she seethed.*

Mrs Ford was right. Her dear mother had abandoned her. Now she was all alone to collect the shards of her crumbling mind. She wondered how this could have happened. She had done nothing wrong. She had a happy life with Adam. She was a saintly, demure housewife that could do no wrong even if she tried.

“Do you ever contemplate taking your own life?” the therapist asked bluntly one day.

Mrs Ford laughed like the question was utterly ludicrous. And yet she didn't answer. It varied from day to day. Sometimes she believed her mother would come to rescue her. Other times she wasn't so sure.

That is until one beautiful summer's day, a simple thought crossed Mrs Ford's mind that changed the way she thought about her entire outlook on life. She was sitting in the facility gardens, dressed in a simple grey tracksuit, as she took in the delightful fragrances of all the flora and fauna before her. The sounds of birds and the tinkling of wind chimes sent her into a long-forgotten state of repose. That was when it struck her like a lightning bolt. A voice called out to her from within, a voice so startling and true that it may have been her own.

*Faye doesn't care about you.*

Mrs Ford immediately burst into a fit of hysterical tears. She knew it was true. Deep down she always knew but she kept it hidden from herself to keep moving forward. She loved her mother dearly and she believed nothing could ever change that. Nothing. It hurt her so much to discover that she would be alone forever. She had no family, no friends, and no dignity. She only had those damned therapists and doctors that spent every other day observing her like a science experiment.

If days could be seconds and months hours, the passing seasons were the long clock, the turning of the infinite in ways that rendered Mrs Ford's soul to the greatest clarity. The more she talked to her therapist, the louder the voice from within spoke to her. At first, she believed she was losing her mind, but in time, she came to learn that she had lost it long before she was admitted to the facility. After countless treatments,

it became apparent that the voice inside her head was her true self finally coming to terms with what happened to her; what happened to me.

Ms Ellie Davenport was a delusion.

Mrs Ellie Ford was a delusion.

The only true person to ever own this body was me.

And I didn't even know who I was.

It didn't happen overnight, but with the aid of psychiatric treatment, I gradually pieced small parts of myself back together. The version of myself that emerged was a broken human who no longer recognised themselves. It was honestly the worst experience of my entire life. It was hard to accept what had been done to me over the years. It was too much for one fragile mind to comprehend. The majority of my being was still Ellie but all it took was one crack to bring down the dam.

My psychiatrist, whose name I had eventually learned to be Dr Jane Campbell, helped me in tiny incremental steps. Despite making progress in getting back to myself, I still yearned to return to the delusion, not because I enjoyed it, but because it was everything I knew. It was safe. It was easier than addressing the torrent of abuse that I endured for over a decade and a half.

To be honest, I didn't believe that I could ever truly recover from being Ellie. After everything I went through, I could never go back to being my former self either. That person was surely dead. Feeling alienated inside my own body was a familiar pain that I endured for many years, but not knowing my mind

was a whole new trauma to deal with. With the spell of delusion gradually fading, I fell into a space between spaces. As I said, swathes of black had consumed my memory.

All I knew was that I was once called Brian.

“Memory repression is a controversial subject,” said Dr Campbell, during one of our countless sessions. “But people cope with severe trauma by dissociating or detaching from what’s happening. This detachment can blur, alter, or block memories. That may explain why you can’t remember the ordeal of being forced to undergo a sex change. Faye denied who you were and by extension, you did the same just to keep her from further abusing you. When you deny an event, or in this case, an entire person, the picture of your life can become blurred.”

Dr Campbell assured me that I should trust her. At first, I believed she was asking a lot from me. Considering she inferred that my entire life was a constructed lie perpetuated by an abusive and controlling monster, you can understand why I would be distrustful. My loyalties were torn. Despite everything, the sad truth was that I still loved Mother. I missed her dearly. I knew this was not normal considering everything she did to me but I couldn’t help how I felt. A part of me argued that there was nothing wrong with loving her. It didn’t harm anyone so what was the problem?

“Did you love her this much when you were a child?” Dr Campbell asked one day.

It was such a simple question. Whenever I tried to strike up a memory from my past I’d encounter an immediate blockage. The closer I got to retrieving



anything from my formative years, the more scrambled my brain seemed to get. All I could remember was a vague sense of fear towards Mother. I remembered that Dad changed after he started dating her. I remembered the smell of rain hitting the concrete pavement outside the café where I was first introduced to her. I was an innocent child and she hated me from the moment I met her.

“Back then I used to call her Faye,” I mumbled into space. Like sunlight breaking through heavy clouds, a powerful sense of Déjà-vu overcame me. “I-I hated her.”

“What do you think changed that?” said Dr Campbell.

I honestly didn’t know how to answer. I just started to panic.

“It’s okay, you don’t have to answer,” said Dr Campbell. “We can talk about something else.”

It took a lot of therapy but memories of who I used to be gradually materialised. It was painful to confront Brian after he was repressed for so many years. You might think this was a good thing but accepting my true self also meant I had to accept the body I inhabited. It was still mine, of course, but it had been twisted into something that didn’t register with the person in my head.

My mind may have been freed but I was now extremely aware that I was trapped in a woman’s body. The surgeries I underwent over the years were drastic and detail orientated. Every part of my maleness was scrubbed. Even if I dared to correct this with further surgeries, which I was far too tired to consider, I knew I wouldn’t be the same again. There

just wasn't any point.

The necessities that came with having a woman's body provided a constant signal to my mismatched mind. For some time, I had trouble with back pain. One day, when I expressed my discomfort to a care assistant, she informed me this was probably because I didn't wear a bra.

"And with breasts as large as yours, you could do with a new fitting!" she said, stripping the sheets from my bed. "I'll tell you what, I have a friend who is a professional fitter. Why don't I speak to management about letting her in one day to do a fitting? That will surely help your back pain!"

I couldn't exactly refuse, even if I was deeply embarrassed. The care assistant meant well and was trying to help. She wasn't aware of my history. All she knew was that I sometimes had severe episodes of depression and needed to be monitored 24/7. Nonetheless, it wasn't a nice feeling to have a stranger come into my room and fit me into a new brassiere. I had gained a lot of weight since I entered the home.

I probably observed my body in more detail than ever while living in the psychiatric hospital. There was something I didn't trust about the mirror in my ensuite bathroom. I knew the woman in the mirror was meant to be me, right? I just thought...well, I don't know what I thought. I tried a few experiments where I'd try to catch the woman moving on her own accord, but no, still me. I didn't like what I saw. The eyes that spent so many years glassed over and vacant now looked alive with fear. I recognised those eyes all too well. I covered the mirror with a towel.

"You've been very despondent lately," Dr Campbell

said.

I scoffed and shook my head. "Lately?" I said, unable to make eye contact.

"Anything, in particular, you would like to discuss?"

For some time, my thoughts lingered on one specific memory retrieved from the bowels of my psyche. I could see Mother watching me closely, stroking my leg back and forth in a rhythmic motion. The pressure would mount on my wrists and ankles. I would be taken right back to the room, shackled to the bed as she informed me of her intent to give me female genitalia. I recalled her saying, "You won't ever be able to run away from me."

I related this memory to Dr Campbell. I could tell she was shocked, appalled even, but her professional duty forced her to feign indifference. This opened the gates to more stories of what Mother did to me; the rigorous lessons in presenting myself, her attempt to manipulate my sexual orientation, the attempted reversal of my sex change to teach me a lesson, and the constant slew of punishments. The more I talked, the more I found myself distancing from Mother's influence.

Or should I say Faye's influence?

I'd love to tell you that I was completely cured of all my ailments, but unfortunately, that can never be so. After three years of living in a psychiatric hospital, I learned to accept what had been done to me. Although I could never be the same again, Dr Campbell and all the staff around her gave me the tools I needed to live with my past experiences. "When I first read your file, I was shocked by the sheer volume of horrors you

experienced,” said Dr Campbell, “but look at you now. Look how far you’ve come. You are honestly the most remarkable person I have ever met.”

As for Faye, well, in the fullness of time, I was told what happened to her after I was admitted to the hospital. Dr Campbell broke it to me carefully so I had the time to cope with it.

Faye disappeared with Holly shortly after the police took me in. Neither of them had been seen in three years. There was a warrant out for her arrest but the police had more or less given up on the search. They could have been anywhere in the world.

When I was told the news, the first thing that came to mind was Holly. She would have been sixteen years old by now. I wondered what kind of life she had. Was she on the move, constantly evading authorities with Faye? Was she living in a new town under a new name? Was she happy? Who could know? I spent so many years hating her but now I pitied her more than the man inside me. Did she know how monstrous her mother was? Did she know why they just upped and left town for good?

I pondered these questions to no end. The mere thought of Faye still being out there was disturbing. I didn’t have the strength to feel angry about it. I was far too tired for that. But I knew one thing. Should I see her again, although it was unlikely, I wouldn’t be so easily manipulated. I hoped to see her so I could turn her in to the police myself.

Daniel, on the other hand, was caught by the authorities. He was trialled and expected to serve a

forty-year prison sentence for running his illegal black market surgery, as well as performing operations on non-consenting patients. Due to his age, he would likely die in prison. I didn't know how to feel about this. Yes, he got what he deserved but none of it changed the fact that he took money to turn me into a girl against my will. Again, I only felt for Holly. She was a true innocent caught in the middle of this whole charade. The poor girl.

Adam was also serving a prison sentence of twenty years. He was jailed for being a secondary party to his father's crimes. He had complete knowledge of what went on in the clinic and yet he did nothing. Furthermore, the court learned that he knew all along that I was forced to undergo a complete change of sex. He knew that I had no choice in any part of my life and he preyed on that. When I discovered this, I was shocked. I'll never forget what he said on our second date when we went to the beach.

"I know that your old name was Brian," he said. "I know that you're transgender. And I know you wanted my Dad to help you."

After everything I learned in psychiatric treatment, I felt foolish to have ever thought that Adam wasn't complicit in the crimes inflicted upon me. It became evident that I was too messed up to recognise it at the time. Of course, he was aware of what had been done to me. During our entire marriage, he showed little to no regard towards who I was other than a hole to be filled. It was clear that he was even more twisted than his father.

Sometimes I'd wake up in the middle of the night and

feel the weight of Adam's bulk pressed against me. I wouldn't be able to move for a couple of seconds until I broke free, gasping for air.

Again, I was glad he got some form of comeuppance but it didn't change the fact I lived under him for over a decade, literally and figuratively. I'd have to live with the mental scars for the rest of my life.

## 5.

During my psychiatric treatment, a dream of independence materialised through my fogged state of mind. Dr Campbell believed that this was a positive sign. She said something about hope prevailing but I wasn't so sure about that. It's difficult to forget the pain. It's even more difficult to remember happiness when they don't leave scars behind.

I believed I still had enough time to begin over again. I would live away somewhere big and meet a woman – a kind woman who loved me for whom I truly was – and I would marry her. Then we would move away to the country. We would buy a cottage there, and surround ourselves with friends, books, and animals. We would be free forever. I would forget Faye and everything awful that had happened to me. But it was just a dream that felt far out of reach. Normality was for other people, not me.

I was forty-four years old when the day came for me to leave the hospital. The feeling was strange. After spending many years fooling myself into thinking I was seven years younger, clarity had cleared my psyche to reveal the merciless cruelty of time. Half of my life was spent living under the guise of being

physically female. I lived the schooling life, the professional life and the married life. Now I was taking the next big step. Who was I going to be? I had absolutely no clue.

I had aspirations to be better but I often dismissed them as mere fantasies. I was terrified of going out into the big bad world alone. I was accustomed to living a life led by someone else's rules. Whether it be the prison warden, Faye or Adam, I was used to being institutionalised. And yet Dr Campbell believed that I was ready to face my demons head-on.

"I'll always be here for you if you need anything," she said, hands resting on my shoulders. "Remember, you are a remarkable person. Don't forget that."

"I'm not ready to leave," I said, fighting back the tears. I felt like a little child but I couldn't help how I felt. "I'm afraid of what's out there."

"I know it's hard but you have to trust me," said Dr Campbell. "You are more than capable of carrying on outside of this place. It's frightening, I know. Many patients feel the same when faced with the prospect of independence. When people get better they don't believe they can continue on outside of these walls. But that isn't true. We have helped you this far. Trust me when I say that you're ready."

I glanced around the room which had been my home for nearly four years. Dr Campbell looked upon me with a mixture of sympathy and pride, like a proud parent would when sending her firstborn to college.

"Come here," she said, bringing me in for an embrace.

The barriers crashed down. I sobbed into her shoulder. She was one of the few people in my life who seemed to truly care about me. I would miss her terribly.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done,” I wept. “I’ll never forget what you did.”

Dr Campbell and I parted ways shortly thereafter. Security led me to the front gate of the hospital grounds. It felt as though I was being taken to the gallows.

Walking out into the hot summer’s day, I gazed up at the pale blue sky, cloudless and infinite. Sunlight seared against my pale skin. I could feel the heat trapped within the broiling tarmac beneath my feet. The iron security gate ahead loomed large in the haze.

“This feels familiar,” I muttered to myself.

The closer I neared the exit, the more I wrangled with my will to stay collected. *It’s okay, it’s okay*, I thought. *There is nothing to fear. You are ready for this.*

The security guard unlocked a door in the gate and swung it open with a whining creak. He turned around with a tight-lipped smile on his face. “Best of luck to you ma’am,” he said, gesturing to the doorway.

I didn’t know what to say. I was hesitant to take any further steps. I turned around and considered the hospital building for a moment. There was a clear pattern in my life. It was yet another institution I had to leave behind.

This time, however, I was leaving a place that did more for me than I could ever ask for. There would be



nobody waiting for me on the other side of the gate like last time. I was on my own. It was up to me to create the life I wanted. I was about to be free.

The bus ride was beautiful. The countryside rolled by me like a divine fingerprint, curving and changing, no two parts the same. In all the world this view was unique.

The greenery glowed in the sunlight. Every dip and sway of the land, the patterns and species of fauna, the ever-changing mountains. It was like seeing the world for the first time. I couldn't remember the last time I felt so...present. The bus rocked me forth to my new home, Leaside Valley. Hours passed by until dusk made the promise of starlight.

The journey zapped all of my energy by the time I arrived. Seeing the world again after so many years would surely do that to a person. All I had in my possession was a small carrier bag and a map, which I followed to my new home.

Located above a Chinese restaurant on the main thoroughfare, my apartment was by no means a fancy studio loft. It was quite old with a dated interior that may have been previously renovated in the early eighties. There was, however, a lot of potential.

The warm and welcoming landlady introduced herself as Mrs O'Connell.

"You'll find a fresh loaf of soda bread in the oven," she said, as she toured me around the small space, bent double over her awkward hobble. "I'm sure you could do with a bite after such a long journey."

She was rather old, seventy-five, perhaps eighty years old, yet she retained a remarkable pep in her step as she showed me around the apartment. "I live up on the third floor, or right above you, I should say, so if you ever need anything just give me a shout," she said after handing me the keys.

And that was that.

## 6.

My first six months of freedom rolled by methodically. I was fuelled by a spark to become the best version of myself. For the first time in my life, I put fear aside and took control. There would only be total organisation. Every incremental feeling would be dealt with and processed immediately. Nothing would be out of place.

I had to get better. I started by eating healthier foods. I joined the local gym in an attempt to shed the weight I had gained over the years of idleness. It was hard but I persevered, living every day with military precision. I converted the spare bedroom into a study so I could write during the day. I treated it like a job. Even if I had nothing to write about, I still sat at the desk.

Sometimes I wrote about my life experiences, other times I related diary entries about how I was feeling. Putting all of my experiences on paper was both liberating and painful. It reminded me of how messed up my life had been. But it also brought to mind how vital it was for me to maintain balance to prevent myself from spiralling.

This sense of drive surprised even me. When I thought

about it, it was evident this determination was born to spite the past. I had become hardened after years of pain and torture. I never would have made it to this point alone. If not for the help I received from my ongoing psychiatric treatment, I would certainly be dead. When I was arrested for identity fraud, I really did believe that my life was over. In reality, after a decades-long journey, it was only just beginning. I wished to go back and tell myself that everything would be okay.

My social circle was small but manageable. There was Mrs O'Connell who became very dear to me. Sometimes she would leave lunch boxes of home-cooked dinners outside my door. Other times she would stop by just to ask how I was doing. Of course, I'd be foolish to deny the fact that Mrs O'Connell was aware of my case history, as the hospital helped me procure the apartment when I was a resident there, but that didn't matter. What mattered was her genuine, unabashed loveliness.

I didn't know that people could be so kind.

The other person I spoke with regularly was Dr Lana, my new therapist. She quickly proved herself to be a vital component in my ongoing recovery. She was the one who encouraged me to write. She believed cataloguing my thoughts and feelings would give me a better understanding of my patterns of thinking.

Dr Lana also put me in touch with support groups for transpeople. I was initially apprehensive to attend these group therapy sessions due to my unique history. At first, it didn't feel appropriate, but in time, I found that connecting with other people that also felt

alienated in their bodies helped me feel less alone.

Regardless, I more or less lived the solitary life now. Every person I talked to seemed to be an important component in my continuing recovery. But the pain of loneliness gave way to calm confidence, self-reliance and realisation. Taking care of myself meant I could one day make a friend that only knew the best version of me. Or perhaps someone more than a friend.

I discovered that solitude can be a teacher. It gives you the space to take a square look at your inner demons one by one, let the light shine upon them and learn from what they have to say.

I can tell you that it wasn't easy living in the shadow of my past but I continued onward and distracted myself by focusing on the present. That was most vital. But the future warned of something crucial ever since I began my journey back to sanity. I was forever standing idle at a crossroads, pondering which direction to take regarding my identity. I couldn't put it on the back burner forever.

Inside me was a person that I didn't know anymore. Outside was the physicality of a woman standing at 5'6 and 170 lbs. The face staring back at me from the mirror looked haunted by the story of her existence; of how her visage was a consequence of enforced surgery to erase what had once been. Compared to my own eyes, the sight could often make me feel disassociated from reality. Was I to remain in this body until my last breath was drawn?

I didn't have a lot of knowledge on hormone replacement therapy or sexual reassignment surgery until my doctor filled me in on the cold, hard facts.

The primary source of testosterone was produced in the testicles whilst the primary source of oestrogen was produced in the ovaries.

Without one or the other, I had to take hormones to supplement it, otherwise, I risked serious health issues. I didn't have testicles anymore. I continued to take oestrogen as I had for twenty-odd years. I could have ditched it for testosterone but I didn't see the point when every other feminine part of me had been meticulously crafted to be everlasting.

At times, I did seriously consider further surgeries to reverse the changes. I researched how it could be done in great detail and even contacted professionals to learn more. Yes, I ignored the fact that I'd never be able to afford the cost of these surgeries, especially for female-to-male patients, but I didn't care. I needed to know if it was possible.

By the time I had the information, I was too tired to continue. The damage was done and I was stuck this way. Enough of my life had already been spent going under the knife. I wasn't prepared to face it again any time soon.

It's interesting. Whenever I had to urge to *fix* myself, I knew I was close to having a mental breakdown. I hadn't come to terms with my physical appearance quite as much as I had with my healing mind. It seemed the more I recovered from my mental scars, the more alienated I felt inside my skin. So I remained at the crossroads for quite some time, talking about it at length with Dr Lana and my support group.

If I'm honest, I can't even remember what it was like

to be a man. I'm not talking about memories fading through time or anything like that. The man in me may never have existed. Blank.

All I knew was how to be the woman I was trained to be in the latter half of my life. I may not have maintained my femininity in terms of how I looked or dressed but I was open to embracing being...womanly. I still walked and talked like Ellie despite my mind being me, whoever *me* was.

Dr Jane believed these habitual imprints that had been forced upon me would eventually fade through the passage of time. "You are suffering at the hand of your subconscious muscle grooves. Your solution lies in three steps: awareness, commitment to your goal, and deliberate "retraining" of the malformed muscles."

I wasn't sure about Dr Jane's advice. How could one attempt to reverse nearly twenty years of something as inconsequential as how one walks and talks?

This was how Brianna was born.

When I was arrested and Ellie's name was stricken from the record, my name subsequently reverted to my birth name, Brian Philips. The woman in the mirror certainly didn't look like a Brian, nor did her voluptuous body scream forty-four-year-old man either. I finalised my decision to legally change both my name and gender. In the eyes of the law, I now identified as female and went by the feminized variation of my birth name. I became Brianna Philips, a person free to make their own choices.

It was a major step towards accepting myself, albeit

for practical purposes rather than personal ones. Nonetheless, it seemed I had just created a whole new person out of thin air. A merciful bullet flew through Brian's head with me, Brianna, pulling the proverbial trigger. It was strangely painful to let go of a person that I have vague memories of being but at least it was on my terms this time. I had to move on.

Dr Lana continued to carefully monitor my progress during my first year outside of hospital care. According to her reports, I had grown "by leaps and bounds" in becoming a healthier person, both mind and body.

In doing so, I had become increasingly bored of being idle. With my new identity to boot, I managed to find employment as a front-of-house receptionist at Fairpoint Castle, a luxury five-star castle outside of Leaside Valley. It wasn't the most exciting job in the world but it kept me busy and allowed me to feel just a little more like a normal person.

My duties as a receptionist felt vaguely familiar from my time working as Faye's secretary. All I had to do was smile, answer queries and help maintain the hotel's upstanding image. There was a dress code, of course, but I chose to wear the male equivalent of the uniform – a white dress shirt, plum tie with a black waistcoat and matching trousers. It took time for me to get used to being out in the working world again. But after a couple of months, I floated through each day with relative ease.

I became rather friendly with one of my colleagues. Her name was Amy. She occupied the front desk with me four days a week. She was a plump, bubbly woman in her late thirties. Excitable, vibrant and seemingly always happy, I found her unyielding positivity to be

a sort of crutch that helped me get through the day. She was always complimenting me even when it was completely unnecessary.

“You’re such a good worker!”

“You always look great!”

“You’re a hero, Brie, an absolute superstar!”

At first, I found her constant stream of platitudes to be rather suspicious. But the more I got to know her, the more apparent it became that she just liked to make people feel good. Knowing this signalled an emerging sense of trust in other people.

I was a person who was uncomfortable in my own skin and I believed she noticed this. Regardless, I found this curious woman to be inspiring. She was a single mother to a five-year-old boy and always managed to look her best despite juggling so many responsibilities.

A part of me wanted to be like her. I questioned if this was healthy so I relayed these thoughts to Dr Lana. She believed that there was nothing wrong with taking inspiration from people who thrive during hardship.

“As for the appearance aspect...” said Dr Lana, carefully considering her words, “...well, they’re just clothes.”

I didn’t expect that I would experiment with female clothing after all these years. It wasn’t just being in Amy’s elegant presence that inspired these desires, no. A large part of me only wished to see what it was like to partake in it willingly.

After all, I had the body of a woman. I wished to see



how I felt when I dressed like one. So I contacted my manager to order the female equivalent of my work uniform. For some time, I hid it away in my wardrobe until I forgot about it. As I leafed through the rail during one inexplicable weekend, I rediscovered it and decided to wear it the next work day.

On Monday morning, I lay the work uniform across my bed, standing back for a moment to consider its significance. I twitched with anticipation. Faye's voice had been long absent from my head, but in this instance, I feared it would come back to haunt me.

The circumstances felt all too familiar. In a long and troubled history of presenting myself as a woman, I was about to willingly dress as one for the first time. *It's okay, I told myself, they're just clothes. Nothing more than mere fabric, fashioned into a discernible shape to suit the wearer.*

It was not a heavily sexualised outfit. Feminine, sure; but certainly not designed to attract leering eyes. It was a basic, formal work uniform that was just...a set of clothes. Nobody was forcing me to do anything. This was all by my own will. If I didn't like it, I didn't have to wear it.

I turned my gaze from the uniform to the full-length mirror, where a forty-five-year-old woman looked back at me, dressed in a plain white bra and panty set. After twenty-two years, pain no longer glimmered behind my green eyes. A little jaded, perhaps, but something else indicated traces of a new person emerging. Today felt different than every other day.

I picked up the black pencil skirt. After all this time,

I never thought that I would wear one again. I placed one foot into the skirt, hesitating for a moment, as I presumed one would before jumping out of an aeroplane. My hands fumbled around the waistband, threatening my poise with a potential flashback. *It's okay, I thought again, they're just clothes.*

Shaking all over, I placed the other foot in, raising the polyester skirt up the legs and over my belly button. The world had not ended.

It's hard for me to describe what I felt at that moment. I had spent half my life pretending to be a person of the opposite sex. For over twenty years, I truly believed that I was a heterosexual cis-woman who was the purest embodiment of conservative femininity. It may have been forced upon me but I was complacent every step of the way. I told this lie again and again until it felt true, suppressing every inclination I had towards my former life to survive.

"Right then," I said lowly, releasing a deep breath that I didn't know I had been holding in. It seemed that dressing in clothes typically associated with my adopted physique didn't feel the same as it did throughout my time as Ellie. Since it was my decision, it felt rather liberating.

The light, low tie-neck blouse was next. Puff shoulders, short sleeves with a plum shard pattern and side split detail at the hem. When I was Faye's secretary, I would have worn a similar blouse regularly. Wearing the skirt made me feel brave.

Confidence swelled in my chest, my heart continuing to race, as I buttoned up the blouse through the front.

In my periphery I glanced at the mirror, neatly tucking the blouse into the skirt. I couldn't restrain the tight-lipped smile from turning into a grin.

A peculiar sense of self-assurance washed over me. I stopped dressing and closed my eyes to bask in its magical influence, savouring every second of the fleeting sensation. I knew it wouldn't stick around forever. It was a rare feeling that I recalled experiencing before. I retrieved the forgotten moment from the album of my memory. Faye and I were in a restaurant. We were celebrating my positive report card from school.

*You are a very special girl*, said Faye, *Ms. Emily Davenport, my adorable daughter*. I remembered how she cradled my cheek, entwining my fingers with hers while I nuzzled deeper into her caress, like a cat.

*You really think I'm special?* I said.

*Of course I do, sweetheart. Don't you ever doubt that for one second.*

I opened my eyes to the present moment, feeling a little sad. In therapy, I had to confront the sad reality that I really did believe that Faye loved me. It was one of the most difficult hurdles I had to overcome. Imagine feeling loved for the first time in your life only to be told that it was all a lie. I never even experienced such a bond with my own father. Of course, I now recognise that the so-called love that Faye reserved for me was merely a weapon used as a means to an end.

There was a time during therapy when I believed that

Faye was the one who broke me. But I have since grown to view the situation with more clarity. I was lost long before Faye even laid a finger on me.

I was an impulsive, angry kid who couldn't register that I craved affection. Knowing this doesn't excuse the choices I made. A girl died because of my actions. It happened for no reason other than I wanted to sell drugs to buy even more drugs for myself. But accepting the past helped me embrace that I would bear the cross of guilt for the rest of my life. Until now, I never properly dealt with the shame and guilt that came with my hand in Jess Campbell's death. My compliance with Faye's abuse was primarily dominated by fear and trauma.

It wouldn't be imprudent to suggest that it also stemmed from a desire to forget the past, to abandon the former to become a new self. Faye used the fragmented shards of my very being to mould me into the daughter she wanted more than life itself. She manipulated and abused me, making me believe that there was no escape; all while showering me with the love I so desperately craved.

Withdrawing myself from my innermost thoughts, I slipped into the black blazer. I closed the single button, marrying the form-fitting shape with my modestly slim waist. It featured slits on the hem with peaked lapels that exhibited the tie-neck blouse beneath. When I turned to look at myself again, I saw a working woman. My hair had long since returned to its original mousy brown colouring. The style was without flair or embellishment with its side-parted, mid-length form that barely tickled my shoulders. I brushed it and tied it back into a ponytail.

I stared at myself in the mirror for quite some time. My confidence was brittle but it was there by my side, encouraging me to be brave. The self-assurance of being physically female no longer came from an intoxicating desire to be validated by my abuser. It came from deep within me. The variables that led me to this day may have been designed by someone else, but I was the judge of this final decision.

We are born as who we are. Gender is something that is imposed on us. I was born a boy and I identified as such until all of my masculine traits were forcibly snuffed out of me. I was forced to embrace my feminine side until it became all I knew. But what are masculinity and femininity other than boxes to be ticked?

My mind may have been at odds with my physicality but I was still me. If I could snap my fingers to reverse all of the surgeries inflicted upon my body, I would, but I can't; not anytime soon. I'm not ashamed to be perceived as a woman because I don't think it's shameful to be one. If anything, accepting Brianna was the most liberated I ever felt.

I looked at my watch. *Goodness, I was going to be late!* I thought. I quickly dashed to the bathroom mirror and applied some mascara, eyeliner and lip gloss; nothing too fancy, just light, casual makeup that I had purchased the day before. I grabbed my bag and threw it over my shoulder. High heels dangling the crook of my fingers, I slipped into a pair of black ballet pumps and then I was out the door.

When I arrived at Fairpoint Castle, I climbed out of my dingy little car and slipped into the black two-inch

high heels. I looked at the grand hotel building with a sense of awe. "It's okay, Brie," I said, feeling a pang of insecurity rising. "This is what you want."

I slowly picked up my stride, heels clip-clopping into the vast shadow of the centuries-old castle. I stopped, suddenly remembering that I hadn't put on my name badge. I rummaged through my bag until I found it and pinned it to my breast.

*BRIANNA PHILIPS*

*Receptionist*

"Hey, Brie!" called a voice from behind. It was Amy. I turned to face her, cheeks burning red for fear of my appearance being judged.

"Hi Amy, how are you?" I said meekly.

"Not too bad," she said, linking her arm to mine. "I must say that you're looking lovely today, not to say that's surprising, as you always look great! The lady's uniform really suits you, Brie!"

Blood rushed to my head, my cheeks burned even hotter. "Thanks, Amy!" I said.

## 7.

I continued to live my life with the hope of forgetting. Naive, I know, as one cannot simply erase the past. I accepted my actions from when I went by the name of Brian and embraced the person I became.

But I couldn't forget about Faye. She no longer controlled me but she certainly continued to live in my

head rent-free. I thought about her a lot. I didn't want to think about her but I couldn't help it. She was the arbiter of everything that led me to the person I was today. Knowing that she may still be out there was disturbing to consider.

Over the years, the police gradually reduced the extent of their search for Faye until they stopped looking entirely. The curious case of the deranged stepmother was considered all but a dead end. She had escaped long before the authorities had even put their socks on. She could have been dead for all anybody knew.

This lack of closure was difficult to live with at the time. It kept my mind on my former oppressor more than I'd care to admit. What if she tracked me down and kidnapped me? Sure, I knew these feelings were irrational. It was nearly impossible to find me when I lived in an unknown location under a new name. But the trauma of experiencing Faye's seemingly infinite power for so many years still managed to, at times, make me feel unsafe. Despite being aware of this, I still wondered, *what if?*

That all changed on an inexplicable day when my life was turned upside down once again. I was minding my own business, enjoying my lunch break with Amy in the staff room when I received a phone call from an unknown number. An icy chill ran down my spine, making me shudder, as though my body was preparing to enter a state of fight or flight. I answered, hesitantly. "H-Hello?" I said.

"Good afternoon, this is Detective Hansen of North Stockport Police Department," said a gruff, no-nonsense voice of a man. "Am I speaking to

Brianna Philips, formerly known as Brian Philips of Hazelbrook?”

This was it. It had to be. Words caught in my throat, and I could only gasp for air. Amy froze in the middle of chewing her food and looked up, eyes wide with alarm. She sensed trouble stirring within me. It must have been evident on my blood-stricken face.

“Speaking,” I said lowly.

“We have your stepmother, Faye Davenport in our custody. She walked into the station last night to turn herself in.”

I could feel my mouth drop, jaw trembling, as the walls of resilience began to crack. Amy didn’t waste another second and dived in to provide comfort. She pulled her chair around to my side of the table, stroking my back in a soothing, circular motion.

“She – she turned herself in?” I said, throat swelling.

“Yes,” said Detective Hansen. “We have since been made aware of this particular case after reading Faye’s file. You don’t need to worry. We got her. You’re safe.”

It’s difficult for me to describe what I felt at that instant. When Faye started my transformation way back when, I often used to cry myself to sleep, hoping and praying that someone would knock down the door. I wanted that person to rescue me and banish my tormentor to the depths of hell for eternity. That moment had finally come, albeit more than twenty years too late.

“Are you there?” the detective said.



“Uh, yes,” I said, snapping out of shock. I dabbed my finger on my cheek to find wet mascara. I didn’t even know I was crying until then. “Did – did you say that she turned herself in?”

“That is correct,” said the detective. There was a long, drawn-out silence, which gave me a moment to register Amy’s comforting touch. “Look, I’m not at liberty to give any details as of yet. I just thought you should know before the lawyers get involved. You know how it is.”

“I – I understand,” I said. “Thanks.”

After twenty years, I never would have suspected that Faye would turn herself in. Was this the same person I had known for all these years? Had a mistake been made? Why would she do such a thing? After asking myself these same questions repeatedly, the finality of the situation hit me hard.

I wept into Amy’s shoulder. She was probably confused. She knew nothing of my past and yet she didn’t pry, offering her comfort nonetheless.

It was over. I couldn’t have expected it to affect me this much for I had more or less moved on. But why did I feel so terribly sad?

Perhaps I wept for Brian. Witnessing justice dealt to the hand that destroyed him was more than enough validation to prove that he was a victim and not merely fair game. I wept for Ellie, the girl so traumatised that she could never admit that she was a mere construct of a controlling abuser. I wept for

Brianna, the culmination of what Faye had started and I had completed.

“Shh,” hushed Amy, continuously soothing my back.  
“It’s okay, Brie. You’re alright.”

The shock of Faye’s return took its toll on me. I took an unpaid leave of absence from work to process the news. I wasn’t allowed to speak to Faye for legal reasons, not that I wanted to. What could I possibly say to her after all these years? I didn’t even know what she looked like. She would have been well into her mid-sixties by now.

As I said, the case was considered all but dead for years. She had gotten away with it. When both Daniel and Adam were sentenced, the court authorities did some simple mathematics regarding Faye’s crucial role in the entire plot to change my sex. This was not only based on evidence and testimonies provided by my ex-husband and plastic surgeon, but also on the fact that she had run away. Innocent people don’t run.

At the time, due to my mental state, I wasn’t considered a reliable source to give a detailed statement on Faye’s role in my forced sex change... until now.

Lawyers clawed at my door, pleading to take on the case. I didn’t want any of this. I had made so much progress. The last thing I wanted to do was dig up old bones but I guess I had to participate whether I liked it or not. She had turned herself in. I couldn’t think of any other motivation for this other than the possibility that she now recognised what she did, even if I still found it rather hard to believe.

What more was there to say?

I didn't attend the trial but I did read the transcript. Faye really did come clean about everything she did. It was painful for me to read, albeit cathartic. I had to remind myself that I was reading a confession before a court of law. At times, it felt like I was reading personal diaries of her innermost thoughts. Faye revealed that her plans to change my sex went back as far as when I was a child.

*Even when he was a little boy, I used to wonder what he would look like in a dress. He was a rather slight, frail little thing. I thought he would have made a pretty little girl. But I also recognised that he was a wild, unruly little brat. I often dreamed of replacing him with the girl I always wanted before puberty set in. I knew this was nothing but mere fantasy but I always thought, what if? I didn't want him. I wanted her. I agonised over what it would take to convince him to become mine. After the pain of losing three babies, I realised it wouldn't take anything to convince him. I had to do it forcibly.*

Frequent breaks were needed throughout my reading of the transcript, as the detailed account of what Faye did to me was an emotional roller-coaster. Conflicting feelings that I hadn't felt in years resurfaced to greet me like an old acquaintance. I hate to admit it, but at times, I found myself empathising with Faye. It was as though I was transported back to the person I was then – complacent, submissive, and broken. It was like reliving every moment of my ordeal condensed into a few hours. On one page I would feel terribly sad, the next pure anger and hatred.

*At the time, I knew what I was doing to Brian was*

wrong. I often wondered how far I was going to take the transformation. On one occasion, he tried to escape. I caught him. As punishment, I shackled him in the basement to starve him into submission. I knew then that I had come too far to turn back. I increased my hold over him from thereon to prevent him from going to the police.

Sometime later, he tried to escape again except this time I allowed it. I planted a handbag with some money. I knew that he would take it and attempt to run away. I followed him over to the next town and waited for several hours outside the motel he stayed in for the night. That was when I discovered something incredible. For six hours, he had been out in the open world, yet he still didn't go to the police.

I had expected that Brian had developed powerful feelings of love towards me. It felt...incredible. I really could have the girl I wanted. After all, why have a daughter that looks the part if she doesn't return the love that I reserved for her and her alone? This epiphany of sorts made me drunk with desire. Of course, I caught Brian just as he left the motel. Shortly thereafter, I booked an appointment with Daniel to perform sex reassignment surgery on Brian. For peace of mind, I made my new daughter believe that she had tracking implants. Ludicrous really, but I couldn't risk her running away from me. I – I loved her dearly. I loved the girl that Brian had become.

Amongst the wide of array of emotions I felt while reading Faye's statement, the pervasive question in my mind always asked: why was she confessing to everything she did? Why now? I continued reading through the account.

Ellie and I adored each other. I had complete confidence that we had an unbreakable bond. So I sent her to school,

*as any parent would. She was an incredibly nervous girl, clearly uncomfortable in her skin. She lacked confidence in her intelligence but she thrived with due diligence and perseverance. It really was like I had a real teenager.*

*That was when things started to get...complicated. I started to see Daniel in a romantic capacity. I knew his son, Adam, had eyes for Ellie. Of course, I kept her strictly off-limits. It was around this time that Ellie confessed that she had kissed another girl. I realised that I had made a fatal error in sending her to school. I couldn't risk her sharing our love with another person. Feelings of lust can make people do foolish things. It was too painful to consider. So I pulled her out of school in fear of losing her trust.*

*I do regret how far I went when I punished her. I opened the gate that allowed Adam to come running in. I ignored the fact that Ellie couldn't return the same feelings he had for her. I believed it was for her own good. Making her and Adam a couple made my desire to have a close-knit family unit a reality. Daniel and I had become serious about our relationship and I – I became pregnant.*

*You see, in the years after Ellie was born, I became increasingly paranoid that I was going to get caught. Guilt consumed me. I knew what I did – what I was doing, was terribly wrong but it was too late to make amends. When I gave birth to Holly –*

*Faye stopped speaking.*

*The transcript didn't bare any description other than what was being said, but if I'm not mistaken, it seemed that she had some sort of breakdown. The judge called for a recess. I continued to read. Around the time Holly was born, Adam proved a valuable*

*convenience to assuage my guilt and paranoia. I could remove Ellie from the picture while also being able to keep a close watch on her. As you know, a woman traditionally takes her husband's name in marriage. Marrying my daughter to Adam meant that I could scatter my tracks further should the powers that be ever discover that her name was stolen.*

*Even before the wedding, Adam would often report to me on how Ellie was adapting to life as a housewife. I – I knew she hated it. She only wanted to be with me, but if I'm to be brutally honest, I couldn't stand to look at what I had created. Her uncanny appearance and manner were almost too perfect to behold. Seeing my old stepson's eyes, dulled over sorrow, peering out from a beautiful woman's face felt unnatural and wrong. I foolishly made myself believe that Ellie could learn to love Adam as she had learned to love me. But I was wrong.*

My thoughts raced faster than I could process them. Years of mental progress unravelled my collectedness like a ball of string to the wind. Perhaps reading the transcript was a mistake, but I knew I'd spend the rest of my life wondering why Faye did what she did. I was no closer to an answer, but the more of the transcript I read, the more apparent it became that there wouldn't be any clarity. I was reading the bizarre confession of a woman who had lost her mind a very long time ago.

It's strange, I have long since come to terms with the fact that Faye never did love me. Yet why did I feel so crushed upon reading her true feelings towards me? Could she be lying? No, no! I knew this type of thinking was dangerous for I could already feel myself concocting justifications for her cruel words, just as I had all those years ago. The hold this woman had over

me was immeasurable and never did go away. It just lay dormant, waiting to be reawakened. Perhaps she was telling the truth. But why was confessing to her crimes more unbelievable than accepting that she had essentially made me a human doll, discarded once the prettier one came along?

I learned that Faye had taken Holly with her on the run for many years, constantly moving across the country while living under an array of guises. When Holly was only ten years old, she ran away, seemingly tired of being constantly uprooted by her mentally unstable mother. She was now eighteen and was preparing to go to college with the help of her foster family. That poor girl. I wondered if she was there at the trial. Did she even care now that she was thriving without her mother?

The remainder of the transcript related to the dialogue surrounding the legal proceedings. For a long time, Faye didn't speak. I wanted to know what expression she wore on her face. Was it guilt? Was it fear? Was it remorse? Regardless of how she felt, it was clear that she was going to be put away for a long time. She had stacked everything against herself. Her lawyer tried to plea insanity but the judge denied this motion, closing the proceedings by remarking as follows:

*In all my years serving the court, I have never encountered a case so odious, atrocious and cruel. The defendant's actions were extremely evil and the product of a design to inflict a high degree of mental and physical torture upon a young man who was completely denied autonomy over his mind and body, the very basics that we, as fellow human beings, should hope to possess to live a free life.*

*Now I understand that in these proceedings it can be easy*

*to forget about the cost of human dignity and sanity at the expense of Mrs Davenport's villainy. As you all know, Brianna Philips isn't here today. Compared with her statement, it would seem that you, Mrs Davenport, have confessed your side of the story truthfully and accurately.*

*I'm sure the court will understand that Brianna Philips doesn't wish to be re-traumatised after everything they went through. The courage they have shown has been very impressive. They gave evidence that showed acts of bravery and courage when presented with unthinkable conditions.*

*This court, independent of, but in agreement with the advisory sentence rendered by the jury does hereby impose a life sentence upon the defendant Faye Abigail Davenport. It is further ordered that on the such scheduled date of imprisonment, you will be taken to Ravenwood Women's Penitentiary where you will spend the rest of your life. May god have mercy on your soul.*

...

Tears dropped onto the page, smudging the black ink letters. Sniffing back my confusing feelings, I wiped them from my face and sat quietly for a while, staring at the wall. I had to process what I had just read.

"She's gone...", I said.

Years ago, when I was Brian, I would have been ecstatic with such good news. I probably would have jumped all over the room with uncontrollable joy. But I wasn't him anymore. Yes, I did feel the purest of relief, like I was finally permitted to stop holding my breath. The assurance of living in a world without Faye was all I needed to continue living life normally. But



why did I feel a vague sense of loneliness? After all the therapy and rehabilitation, I thought I had finally come to my senses.

While an array of confusing thoughts darted about in my head, a frightening certainty threatened to undo all the progress I had made. All I knew was that I had to see her again, if not for the last time.

## 8.

The rain was heavy the day I travelled to Ravenwood Women's Penitentiary. As the guards led me toward the massive concrete building, I firmly clutched my umbrella as though it kept me rooted to the ground. While we waited before a highly secure doorway, I considered the moment in all its surreal significance.

I recalled the heavy downpour from the day I was released from prison. Never in a million years could I have imagined that I would one day return to such a place. And to visit my old stepmother nonetheless. Life was, indeed, very peculiar.

When access was granted by the signal of a loud buzzing noise, it seemed as though I was stepping into the gates of hell. My heart was racing, and my palms were sweaty. My thoughts are immediately brought back to where I was going. I didn't know what I expected to achieve by visiting Faye. Was I looking for answers? Or perhaps I had fallen back into old habits, forever cursed to repeat the same patterns until my time was up.

I didn't really know why I had this powerful urge to see her. It kept me awake too many nights to ignore it.

The fact that I chose to keep this information from my therapist worried me. I never kept secrets from her but I knew she would advise against me visiting her. Deep down I felt I had to for some vague sense of closure.

After being processed by admin, I was guided through a maze of iron, cement and ceramic. The prison was in far worse condition than the one I had been locked up in. Was the poorer state of the facility reserved for those depending on the severity of their crime? Most likely, yes. The stench of sweat, metal and mildew invaded all benign scents. It was impossible to escape from it. Footsteps echoed down the never-ending walkways, lost souls peered out from behind steel bars, some appearing vaguely manic, others bored and resigned to their fate.

It had been three months since Faye was imprisoned. I really couldn't imagine how she was adapting to living in such a god-forsaken place.

As we approached the visitors' room, I stopped dead in my tracks. Chest heaving, eyes filling with tears, I immediately thought that maybe I had made a grave mistake in coming here. Was I really going to face my abuser after all these years? What was I thinking? She never bothered visiting me throughout my sentence. *No, I thought, no you have to face up to her once and for all. You can't be scared anymore.*

I composed myself by taking long deep breaths, looking around the corridor for small details to focus on. "Fluorescent light," I murmured, eyes darting from one visual to the next. "Grey walls, walkie-talkie, baton, door handle...okay, Brie, here we go." Inside the visitors' room, there was a long row of

booths, each separated by divider walls. The security guard gestured towards an unoccupied booth. Feeling as though I was about to jump into the sea, I moved forward in anticipation, shocked to find that there was a stranger sitting on the other side of the glass, waiting for me.

I froze over, frightened. It took me a moment to register that the stranger was her.

It was Faye.

Hair of platinum, face carved with lines and sunken, my old stepmother appeared to have shrunk into a withered shadow of her former self. I was grateful that she didn't initially notice me, as the sight of her overwhelmed me to the point of near tears. The second her attention was drawn to me, a flicker of life flashed across her dull eyes.

"Ellie," she mouthed, slowly placing her palm on the window pane.

At that instant, I thought I had made a grave mistake in visiting her. The vision before me felt like something from a nightmare. I hesitantly turn away, looking to somebody for reassurance, but I was alone. It was just her and I, like in the days of old.

Faye's eyes filled with tears. She was disturbing to behold with her hand struggling to stay pressed against the divider window. The longer I looked at her, the less fear I felt within my bones. She looked so... frail and far older than a woman should in her sixties.

I decided that I had come too far to turn back. I took my seat, sitting level with her eyeline, and picked up

the phone. She removed her hand from the window and picked up the receiver from her side.

“There you are,” said Faye. Her voice was telephonic and tinny. The artifice didn’t help me feel any less unsettled by her phantom-like appearance. “How are you, darling?”

I was stunned. I didn’t wish to respond to Faye’s question. I feared that she would accept any response as a sign of me being there in good faith. But I had to say something. Anything would surely do. In all the months since she was sentenced to life in prison, I never even considered what I’d say to her face. What could I say?

“I can’t tell you how wonderful it is to see you. I’ve waited for this day for a very, very long time,” said Faye, tears streaming down her face. There was a long drawn-out silence that lasted an age. I could see her watery eyes pleading with me to give her a response. “A-Aren’t you going to say something?”

In that instant, Faye reminded me of a manic worshipper amid a religious fit. The more I stared at her, the less fear I felt. Clarity cleared away my confused thoughts and feelings, as a profound realisation overcame me. “You want me to say something?” I said, coldly.

The mere sound of my voice melted Faye’s pitiful expression into one of disturbing adoration. She was probably glad that I still talked in the voice that she had instilled in me. “Yes, darling, anything!” she said. “It’s so good to hear your voice again.” I couldn’t even speak without feeling as though I was

giving her something to work with. Impatience rattled me and I leered into her eyes.

"I – uh –," I said, carefully considering my words. "I – uh, you know, I really did think that I had lost my mind again by coming to see you today, but looking at you now, I realise why I came."

"Why?" said Faye. Hope still clung in her eyes but it was quickly diminishing. She knew I wasn't there to resume being her slave.

"I had to see the person that, for so many years, made me believe that nothing else mattered in the world, but her and I. Now that I'm here, I can see that you're just...a woman. That's all you are. You're not an all-seeing goddess like I had once believed, nor are you a benevolent leader who saw potential in what I could be. You're certainly not my mother either!"

"Ellie, p-please," Faye pleaded. She startled trembling all over. It was a pathetic sight. "D-Don't do this."

"I've told you a million times before, Faye. That's not my name and you know it," I said sharply, trying everything within my power to remain collected. Temptation whispered to me to leave immediately but I wasn't finished yet. "Yes, you're just a woman. Calling you a monster, as the court often did, would be a terrible disservice to everything I endured while living under your thumb. Dehumanizing you does nothing but just justify your actions. Yes, I can see now that you're just a cruel, evil, vile woman."

Faye was weeping uncontrollably now. I hoped that she would calm down but she didn't cease sobbing. I sat back in my chair and exhaled deeply, rubbing my

eyes into the heels of my hands. Suddenly it clicked. It all made sense to me.

“Would you stop crying, please?” I said impatiently. “I’m not finished yet.”

She did stop her incessant weeping for some time. The sobs seemed to pour out of her faster than she could register them. After some time, she calmed down.

“Now I understand why you confessed to your crimes,” I said. “You don’t have anything else to live for, do you? No Daniel, no Holly, no purpose. You believed that by coming clean that I would return to the fold, even if it meant the occasional visit from behind bars. Or did you think I’d come to defend you in court? Is that how bad things are for you now?”

By the look on Faye’s face, I was correct in my assessment. Had I not been helped throughout the years with therapy and rehabilitation, I most certainly would have returned to her. Such desperation from Faye told me not to twist the knife any further. It was clear that by the pitiful wretch behind the glass, she was now painfully aware of the consequences. She wouldn’t be able to harm anyone again.

“Well, your plan to see me again worked, Faye. Here I am, clear as day, but I’m no longer the person you want me to be. This is me now. This is who I am.”

We locked eyes for what felt like an eternity. Once upon a time, I would have been intoxicated by her gaze, but now I felt nothing, as I turned away from them for the final time. “Goodbye, Faye,” I said, putting the receiver down.

I stood up and immediately turned away, exiting

the visitors' room to be escorted out of the prison. An overpowering sense of relief washed over me, spreading from the ends of my fingers to the ends of my toes. A great weight I had carried nearly all my life had suddenly been lifted and I felt unburdened by my own thoughts. I was cleansed and born anew. I was glad I had finally faced up to the proverbial dragon.

The rain had passed by the time I exited the front gate. All the noise and chaos from within the concrete walls was gone. I could hear was the distant chirping of birds and water trickling in the ditch. Sun rays pierced the grey clouds with the promise of vivid blooms, which made me feel light in a dreamy manner.

In the near distance, I could see Amy climb out of the car with her son, Noah, in tow. She was very kind to accompany me on her day off. She looked at me with a warm, compassionate smile, as though informing me that everything was going to be okay. Standing next to her was a tall, slender young woman with a milky white complexion and dark hair. Holly looked upon me with a sense of promise and pride in her eyes.

Nevertheless, the very sight of them all together put an unmovable smile on my face, and I knew then that everything was going to be okay.

## *About the Author*

Lily Florette has flourished since she was but a mere sproutling and will continue to do so until she withers and returns to the soil that nourished her.

In the meantime, she will carry on exploring the weird and wonderful world of gender transformation. She will do this by writing literature and creating artwork that piques her wicked interests and desires.

If you enjoyed this novel, you may also get a kick out of Miss Florette's DeviantArt profile, which you will find linked below. Her gallery boasts an eclectic mix of short stories, original artwork, photo manipulations, and captions – all of which relate to the gender transformation genre.

In addition to this, Lily would also like to inform you that she thrives on correspondence. If you would like to get in touch with her, please don't hesitate to send her an email.

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